

## 3

## Revolution and Civil War

Norway remained neutral during World War I, which, of course, was the chief reason why the Norwegian legation in Russia had to take over the routine work for so many allied foreign stations in Petrograd, as mentioned in the opening chapter. For the English and the French in particular, the situation deteriorated when the Russian Foreign Minister M. Sazonoff, who had been friendly toward the Allies, was forced to resign in August 1916—as a consequence, according to the Moscow-based British representative Bruce Lockhart, of the tsar's failure to spell out a clear policy toward the Germans. Lockhart describes the last few months before the Revolution as a deeply pessimistic period among the Allied foreign representatives in Moscow and Petrograd. In both places, the world war had taken a back seat while people awaited the domestic catastrophe that political observers considered unavoidable.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, founded in 1898 in response to increasing dissatisfaction with the political, social, and economic conditions in Russia, was formally divided into two parties, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, in 1912. Led by

1. Lockhart, *British Agent*, pp. 153–155.

Lenin, the Bolsheviks agitated for an end to the Russian monarchy and wanted the world's proletariat to rise up in protest against what they regarded as bourgeois economic and political repression. The Mensheviks were soon split. During the war of 1914–18, the conservative faction supported Russia's participation in the war, while the leftist faction argued for pacifism. Little wonder, therefore, that when Lenin returned home from exile in April 1917, after the February Revolution and the tsar's abdication, he thought that his squabbling and war-weary fellow countrymen were ripe for yet another revolution.

The December 1916 murder of the monk Grigori Rasputin, known for his frightening power over Tsarina Alexandra, showed that people were not squeamish about the use of weapons. For quite some time, Rasputin had been suspected of conspiring with the German-born tsarina to have Russia start peace negotiations with Germany without considering either the Allies or the wishes of the Russian public. During the February Revolution of 1917, which began with strikes and violent riots in Moscow and Petrograd, Rasputin's bullet-ridden corpse was exhumed and burned. The nation's mood had reached the boiling point in town and country alike.

In July, Kerensky was made the head of a coalition government supported by the Mensheviks, among others. But soldiers and workers did not have the patience to watch his government's first uncertain attempts at reform or its reluctance to make peace with Germany, so they lined up behind Lenin. On October 24,<sup>2</sup> 1917, the situation exploded in earnest under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky. Kerensky fled abroad, while mass arrests, terrorism, social upheaval and the final phase of the war with Germany created a chaos that was followed by civil wars all over Russia.

2. According to the old Russian calendar; November 6 according to the new (Gregorian) calendar.

*Revolution and Civil War*

31

Alexandra tells how the Revolution and its aftermath affected her in Kharkov.

Partly because I was still a child, and partly because every day was saturated with rumors and fear, I cannot with certainty say when I became fully aware of the Revolution, but I soon learned *why* it was called a revolution. My world, as I knew it, was sent spinning and landed upside-down, exploding in demonstrations, processions, and celebrations. Former staunch monarchists now pinned red bows to their lapels and congratulated each other on the fall of autocracy, expecting all ills to be wiped out with one stroke. At the same time, a general amnesty sent political prisoners and criminals alike into the streets, where they mingled with the throngs of sailors and soldiers abandoning their ships and battlefields. Murder, robbery and other violent acts were the order of the day, and our streets were unsafe even in broad daylight.

Knowing that Mama and I were not alone in our distress made the situation a little less painful, but it was hardly a cause for joy. My mother's greatest consolation during those trying years was the Church. I also have an enduring love for the beauty and solemnity of the Russian Orthodox Church services to which my mother had started taking me when I was a very little girl, but I have always found the long, stand-up services physically exhausting. However, while I found my chief support in the rigorous discipline and work at my ballet school, neither discomfort nor persecution by aggressive atheists kept Mama from her Church. She found salvation in the trinity of her faith in God, her hope for Russia's better future, and her love for me. The Cross, the Anchor, and the Heart.

Our own home was no longer a safe and sheltered haven, and our apartment building had also changed. Even before the Revolution, the storage rooms and servants' quarters in the basement had been converted into cheap living quarters for quite a different

sort of people from those living upstairs. Later, when the old established order collapsed, we upstairs children escaped from the strict supervision of mothers and nannies and began to rub elbows with the somewhat mixed company downstairs. In the beginning, we watched the newcomers with curiosity, especially the dark, pockmarked Persian who ran a nearby shoeshine stand and shoe repair shop. A large room at the rear of the basement, opening directly onto our courtyard, was turned into a delicatessen. Because the door was usually left open to air out the pungent smell of pickled vegetables, spices, and fish, this shop soon became a favorite haunt for us children. We played hide-and-seek among the huge, open barrels of sauerkraut, herring, and other merchandise, much to the despair of the fat and obsequious owner.

The housing shortage became acute as the war dragged on and grew worse still when Kharkov became the capital of the Ukraine instead of Kiev, which lay too close to the foreign border. People moved into our town in increasing numbers, but no new housing was being built. Old-time residents in our building and elsewhere were forced to share their quarters with others, and the time came when Mama, too, had to give two or three rooms of our double apartment to another family. The head of that family, an engineer named Mr. Mospanov, had occupied a responsible position that, for a while, had allowed him, his wife, and their almost grown daughter to live in comfort. After the Revolution, however, he fell victim to the new authorities' systematic persecution of people who had been well-off earlier, and one day he threw himself in front of a train rather than comply with a summons to one of those dreaded establishments for interrogation. His wife and daughter stayed on with us, but soon they found themselves with only one room for their own use when new strangers moved into their section of our old apartment.

While the rest of the Ukraine was being destroyed, as countless political factions struggled to gain the upper hand, Kharkov

was under steady Soviet dominance from 1917 until 1919 and was, thus, spared the open warfare and frequent changes in government that made life a living hell elsewhere. Although Mama and I were thus temporarily delivered from the constant fear and personal danger of open warfare, our lives certainly did not become any easier with the abolition of all private enterprise, the regular police force, and courts of law. Not only living space, but also personal stocks of food, clothing, and other goods had to be registered with the authorities. Uninvited tenants freely helped themselves to our furniture and other belongings, which was disastrous considering that Mama and I, like so many of our friends, depended on selling our belongings in order to keep ourselves going.

World War I officially ended in November 1918, which was also the time when White Russian counter-offensives against the Soviet government gained momentum. When the White Army managed to take Kharkov in 1919 after fierce fighting, just as its victorious march on Moscow was losing its impetus, many old Kharkov residents left the city and headed south in the hope of escaping further horrors.

Mama decided that we, too, should take a trip down to the Crimea. She was motivated not only by the issue of our immediate safety, but also by a wish to explore our chances of escaping to Rumania or France, where we had relatives. In addition, she wanted to see if we could salvage some of the possessions we had left with our friends in Yalta. But I know that uppermost in her heart and mind was the hope that she might find at least a trace of my father. We hastily packed a minimum of luggage, locked our remaining rooms, and asked the Kedrins to look after things in our absence.

I remembered trips to the Crimea as pleasant overnight adventures in sleeping cars and elegant restaurant cars. This time, the journey took several days and nights aboard unheated freight

cars with no heat, toilets, or washing facilities. Signs above the large, red, sliding doors said: "Good for 40 men or 8 horses." There were no steps or ramp, so whenever the occasion required it, Mama and I had to be hoisted on and off by some of the countless strangers crowding the dirty floorboards.

When the train finally started moving across the cold autumn landscape, the draft coming up through the large gaps in the floorboards chilled us to the marrow, and so did the knowledge that we had to cross several active fighting zones. Searches were common, and our documents were examined innumerable times by grimfaced men who seemed only to want an excuse to throw us off the train. I tried to look even smaller than I was and hoped they would not see me at all.

When we finally arrived, utterly exhausted by our journey, we found the Crimea overrun by noble, rich, or famous refugees, all on the verge of panic because of the latest news about the unexpected rapid retreat of the White Army. Those who had found a temporary haven in the Crimea knew they would soon be captured unless they could find an escape from the landlocked peninsula. Mama and I found ourselves in an eddy of refugees frantically going from one seaport to another in search of passage on a boat, any boat, whose owner was willing to leave Russia. People paid enormous sums to board dilapidated washtubs and fishing boats.

In all this confusion, finding news of my father was hopeless. After great effort, we located our former Yalta neighbors with whom we had left our possessions when we had first moved to Kharkov, but we had to ask them to continue looking after our things. It was futile to try to bring anything of real value back to Kharkov across the rapidly changing battle zones, and it was equally impossible to find buyers in the Crimea for anything we had to sell. All around us, the panic-stricken rich were offering

fabulous treasures for next-to-nothing, quickly turning the Crimea into an abandoned-treasure trove.

I think that even if we could have obtained passage on one of those boats going abroad, my mother would not, in the end, have taken such a drastic step. But some sort of decision had to be made, for time was running out. It was everybody for himself, and we could not expect help from anyone. Formerly so distinguished and elegant, my mother now looked shabby and drawn, thanks to the rough and brutal conditions of our Crimean odyssey. I could hardly bear to watch this change in her, but when I finally expressed my indignation, she only laughed and told me to be grateful for our perfect proletarian disguise:

The worse we look, the better. Then nobody can guess who we are, so that we can return home without problems. And we must return home—neither of us is strong enough for this gypsy life. And how can we abandon our motherland and our own people and just wander like tramps in foreign countries? Besides, your father might be trying at this very moment to find us in Kharkov. We had better start home before the Reds get here and begin hunting the White refugees. They are merciless.

I must have looked terrified, for she stroked my hair and continued:

It's lucky we have some old documents proving that we've been permanent residents in the Crimea for a long time, and that your father is employed as a doctor in Kharkov—it makes our trip look legitimate. But you must swear that from this moment you'll forget all you've ever known about our family and its origins. Remember that my maiden name is no longer either von Kotzebue or Kossuch! Both our own and other people's lives depend on your discretion.

Then she gave me a very plain name that also began with K.

I readily gave her the solemn oath of secrecy she demanded, and I have never knowingly broken my promise. I felt flattered

by her trust and thrilled at sharing such a romantic secret with her. She did not have to change any of the papers she had with her because none of them mentioned her maiden name. But from that day, whenever she or I had to provide her maiden name, we always used the agreed-upon version.

Our journey back from the Crimea took even longer than the trip down, and I have only disjointed memories of it. I know that we went from Simferopol to Feodosia, where we finally found a small fishing boat taking passengers out of the Crimea by the Sea of Azov. During our anxious wait in Feodosia, I spotted a large and beautiful edition of Lermontov's poetry in a bookstore window, and to my utter delight Mama bought it for me. This lovely gift, which she could so ill afford, saw me through the rest of our ghastly journey.

When we at last returned to Kharkov, the city was already back in Bolshevik hands, and this time they were determined to make their terror felt everywhere. Our most immediate concern, however, was that more of our rooms had been confiscated during our absence. Most of our furniture and other possessions, except for our grand piano and a few other heavy pieces, had been moved into a small room that formerly had been my nanny's bedroom, and which now became our only home. When Nanny ruled our household, her bedroom, to which she retired only to sleep, had been a neat and attractive room, despite the absence of ordinary windows. Now, the flat skylight cast an eerie light over the shambles of our remaining possessions, and when snow covered the glass in winter, we had no daylight at all.

Our living room and Mama's bedroom had been turned over to two young women, one of them a well-known local music-hall singer supported and protected by an influential Commissar. Her real name was Xénia Nikoláievna, but she preferred to be called Sófía Pávlovna, probably to keep her family ignorant of her activities. In the beginning, Sófía was nice enough to occasionally

offer us some of the butter, eggs, and sour cream she received from her influential admirer, but Mama never accepted anything. Young, plump, and good-looking from this nourishing diet, S3fía would lecture us on the harm that reading and studying did to one's eyes and complexion, and on how such activities interfered with success in life.

"To get along in life," S3fía admonished, "a woman must eat lots of good food like eggs, cream, and butter. Then she becomes pink, smooth and attractive and can be appreciated by men who know what's what." This system evidently worked splendidly for her, but she soon understood that her dissertations on the subject were wasted on Mama and me. We remained thin and hungry.

Eventually, S3fía decided that she needed more room. One freezing evening shortly before I met Captain Quisling, I returned home from my work at the PomGol (which I shall describe later). Leaving the frost-pink air behind, I walked up the stairs to our apartment with a vague feeling that something was wrong. Usually, there were people everywhere, but now there was not a soul in sight. I hurried straight to our little room, opened the door and was struck dumb. Our room was absolutely empty. Mama and all our belongings were gone.

Wondering for a moment whether I had come to the wrong house, I ran into the kitchen and from there to the Mospanovs' room. The old lady was at home, and I asked her what had happened. Reluctantly she said:

"Well, nothing unusual happened, really. You know as much as I do about soldiers, searches, and arrests. This time it happened to be your mother the soldiers came for on their truck. Sure, they took her by surprise; she wasn't even dressed. She asked them what they wanted; she protested and begged them to leave her alone. But they wouldn't listen. They just took all your things and your mother, threw them on the truck, and took them away."

"But where did they go?"

“I know nothing about that. Nobody explained to us, either, what they were doing. Everybody here and on the street and in the yard wanted to know, but who would dare to ask those soldiers with their rifles? You’d better ask some of the others who were standing around watching.”

So I dashed around trying to get information from other neighbors, one of whom suggested that I go into hiding myself and not bother about finding my mother. I was frantic by the time I was finally directed to our building’s caretaker or *dvórník*, who now was also the Chairman of the DomKom (the Housing Committee), of which there was one in every apartment complex. Fortunately, he remembered the soldiers mentioning that they were taking my mother to some government office on Nikolaievsky Street, in a building that had formerly housed a dental clinic and a sports club.

It was a long way off, but I ran without stopping, drawing on the last of my strength. When I arrived and walked into the government office downstairs, I was told:

“Go upstairs and check for yourself. People are often brought in and just left there.”

I climbed the steep stairs and found myself in a huge, empty room as long and wide as the whole building. Even today, that moment is still vivid in my memory. The setting sun threw an eerie, yellow light on the walls, touching everything else with its color. Yellow snow was falling into the room through the large, broken windows along all four walls, and an icy wind blew straight through the room, making it colder than the outdoors. And there, in a far corner of that colossal room, I saw the small heap of our furniture and other belongings, looking like scattered toys. Huddled on the top of that heap was the tiny figure of my mother, likewise illuminated by those yellow rays of the dying sun. Ever since, I have associated that dull, yellow color with disaster.

My mother caught sight of me at that moment. She and I were both beside ourselves with joy. In response to my breathless questions about what had happened, she gestured helplessly and said:

“Who knows? They just came and told me that our room was needed for somebody else and that I was to be taken for questioning, and that is all I know.”

I ran downstairs and finally found a man. “What do you want from us?” I asked him hotly. “We cannot stay here; we must return home immediately!”

He shrugged and said it was no concern of his. All the offices were closed, so we would have to wait until morning. I pointed out to him that by that time, Mama and I would probably have frozen to death. In the end, my mother and I were permitted to spend the night downstairs, where we spread our bedding on some large tables and tried to sleep. Mama scarcely let me out of her sight. She cried and told me that I should have gone back home or to the Kedrins’ for the night, but I told her that I only wanted to be with her.

It was the first time I had ever seen my mother lose her nerve.

In the morning, I was directed to go and see a highly-placed Communist official of the newly established RABKRIN,<sup>3</sup> who turned out to be an extremely kind, elderly woman. When I had poured out my story to her, she seemed both surprised and offended by it, and she told me that she was convinced it must be a mistake—a suggestion with which I heartily agreed. She made some phone calls, giving orders with great authority. Then she turned to me, smiled, and said:

“Everything is now in good order, *diétka* [‘my dear child’]. You can pick up your mother and return home.”

3. “Inspection of Workers and Farmers”—Lenin’s short-lived attempt to give greater legal power to the lower classes. The organization was intended to serve much as an ombudsman is expected to do today.

By the time I had run back to tell my mother the good news, a truck was waiting at the entrance of her temporary prison. My mother sat atop our belongings, which had already been tossed back onto the truck. The impatient soldiers told me to climb on the truck, too, and then drove us back to our apartment, where we found the door to our room open.

We later found out that S3f3a had wanted our room and that we were able to reclaim it only because the woman official I had gone to see had overruled S3f3a's Commissar protector.

Although we resumed our old existence, things were never the same. On that dreadful day, at the age of sixteen, I had tasted the bitterness and solitude of adulthood when, for the first time, I felt responsible for myself as well as for my mother. It was truly my childhood's end, and the burden only increased when I turned my attention from our own immediate plight to the horrors around me.