

Muddied Waters

Although Maria's Nansen passport enabled her to leave Russia, she still faced many problems when it came to moving around freely within Europe. It later came to light that these problems were solved personally by Quisling, who with one stroke managed both to reassure the French and Austrian immigration authorities and to increase the documentary evidence for his and Maria's "marriage."

In a letter Quisling wrote to Maria from the Bulgarian capital Sofia on November 18, 1923, he advised her to take the Orient Express from Paris via Switzerland when she went to meet him in Vienna, because "Norwegian citizens" did not need a Swiss visa; she needed a visa for Austria only. To enable her to prove her fictitious Norwegian citizenship to the appropriate authorities, he enclosed two letters written on League of Nations stationery and signed by him. One, written in French, stated that "Madame Mary Quisling" was the wife of Captain Vidkun Quisling, "Délégué de la Société des Nations," who possessed a diplomatic passport number such-and-such. Both civilian and military authorities were requested to offer her their assistance and protection. The other letter, written in German, requested the Austrian Embassy in Paris to give an Austrian entry permit to his

wife, Mary Quisling, who was going to meet him in Vienna. He had their joint diplomatic passport on his person.¹

Among the instructions Maria received in her own letter was this one: "Some days ago (14.) I wrote to Jørgen and asked him to send you 1000 kroners, of which you must give Acia 500. As for the money already paid for you at the *pension*, you must please transfer whatever is left to Acia's account with Madame Glaize." As Alexandra's story below will make clear, she never saw or heard anything of these 500 kroners, which were intended to cover her personal expenses for the next three or four months, depending on the exchange rate. Quisling wrote in conclusion:

I very much hope that you and Acia will become good friends. You know, Maria, you are older than she and a grown woman. She is a child. Be good and magnanimous to her. She is good, she has a heart of gold, I know. I am very glad that you have finally understood me. It was a real crisis for me, but I shall explain this to you later. I do not think I am weak, even if this has affected me so strongly.

Alexandra, too, was rather affected when she was confronted with this letter several decades later.

There is no doubt that Quisling was busy that autumn because of his complicated marital situation and his assignment for Nansen. Only six days before he wrote to Maria from Sofia, he had been to Geneva in connection with his official appointment as Nansen's assistant in working to resettle Armenian refugees. His Geneva instructions make it clear that this assignment would involve a great deal of traveling—indeed, so much traveling that a man in poor health would have been unlikely to manage it in addition to endless negotiations with reluctant refugees and cantankerous governments, and to his continued efforts to make his triangular set-up with Alexandra and Maria function properly. In

1. NB, Quisling Archives, MS fol 3920: XI: 3.

this connection, it is interesting to read Dahl's remarks about the relevant archives in Geneva. The weekly reports that Quisling was supposed to send the High Commissariat are not to be found in its archives, Dahl wrote. "What we know about the Mission is roughly the travel route—plus the results."²

Exactly a month after his stay in Geneva, on December 12, Quisling wrote to Major Johnson from Belgrade (where he supposedly had arrived on December 6) and said that he was sorry that he had not been present at the meeting held on November 30, but he had been confined to bed during most of his stay in Vienna, and he was still ill.³ However, he had evidently not been too ill to welcome Maria.

Alexandra saw no sign of diminished health when she next saw Quisling and Maria together early in 1924, as a direct consequence of a Christmas letter she had written to Maria. That letter will conclude this next segment of Alexandra's recollections about a period in Quisling's life that has remained opaque until now.

My heart wanted to leap out of my chest with joy when I saw Mára standing there in the middle of my room, looking around.

"Dear God," I thought, "it must be Vidkun who sent her to me because he wants me to be with somebody familiar! He cares for me after all—he wants to make things easier for me!" Nevertheless, Paris was a long way from Kharkov.

"Is it really you, Mára? How did you manage to get here?" I exclaimed and sat up in bed, pressing both hands against my runaway heart.

Rushing over to me, Mára replied: "Oh yes, that's quite a story. I'll tell you all about it!" Then she hugged and kissed me

2. Dahl, *Vidkun Quisling*, pp. 102–03.

3. NB, Quisling Archive, Ms. fol. 3920: V (letter from L. Wolff, November 12, 1923; letter from V.Q., December 12).

so warmly that it made me feel uncomfortable, as it usually does when strangers are overly demonstrative and especially if they touch me.

“Come, Mára, and sit down at the foot of my bed. Make yourself comfortable and let me hear everything! When did you leave Kharkov, Mára? What are you doing here? What news do you have from home? I’m really so glad to see you!”

We spent the rest of the night talking about Kharkov and old friends, and of course about ourselves. As I am far too apt to do, I gave Mára more information about myself than was really necessary, while she was rather reserved. She did more listening than talking, and she spoke about general subjects rather than personal ones. Still, I did learn that she had just arrived from Kharkov on an official mission for her Soviet bosses at the PomGol. She said she was a kind of courier and had brought important official documents that Vidkun needed in his new job in the Balkans.

From Vidkun’s letters, I already knew that the possibility of working for Nansen in the Balkans, which he had mentioned to me before he left me behind in Paris, had become a reality. Mára now told me that because his work in the Balkans kept him on the move, she would have to await further instructions from him before she picked up some other papers in Paris and brought all the papers along to his new headquarters, where she was to act as his Russian secretary in his negotiations to resettle a large number of displaced persons now promised asylum in Soviet Russia through the Nansen Mission.

I later found out that Vidkun’s work, both then and later, concerned thousands and thousands of Armenian refugees who had fled from Turkish persecution and nearly as many White Russian émigrés, the remnants of the defeated White Army—officers, soldier, and their families—who had found refuge in Gallipoli and other temporary camps in the Near East. They had now been promised amnesty by the Soviets, but most of the Russians did

not trust the Soviet promises and preferred to emigrate to western Europe or to America, or even to stay in the appalling conditions of the abandoned World War I military camps provided by their “grateful” war allies. Anything rather than risk the Red vengeance. Therefore, they needed a lot of coaxing, and it was Vidkun’s task to assuage their fears and persuade them to return to Russia.

Mára’s explanations sounded perfectly plausible to me at the time, however. Nor did I think it odd that Mára now had managed to make a career for herself in the Soviet bureaucracy because Lenin had said that he would not rest “until every cook learns to govern the country.” On the contrary, I thought Mára was to be congratulated. But deep inside I could not help feeling hurt because it was she, a comparative stranger, and not I, who would see my husband first and help him in his work.

Mára told me that she had all sorts of impressive certificates from the PomGol and a brand new Soviet exit visa, a *zagranichnyi* in the name of Paseshnikova, with which she had managed to get to Paris. The difficulty would be in continuing her journey. That did not surprise me because in the autumn of 1923, France was the only western European country permitting entry to official Soviet Russian representatives (such as agents for the Commissariat for Foreign Trade), until it shut its borders to *all* Soviet Russian citizens in March 1924. At the time in question here, not a single country had given diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union, and all Soviet Russian citizens and their activities were considered suspect.

According to Mára, her French visa allowed her only a brief stay in Paris, during which time she must try to obtain visas for the Balkans so that she could go to Vidkun. Naturally, I could be of no help to her in such matters. I had no idea what was involved because my Norwegian passport allowed me to go and stay wherever I wanted.

Mára eventually seemed to get her situation straightened out.

I was pleased for her sake and thought her success was probably owing to her talents of persuasion. For example, she had been admitted to the *pension* only because she had somehow convinced the person opening the door that she was a relative or close friend of mine, and that she urgently needed to see me.

Now she wanted to move into my room. As she said, there were no other small and inexpensive rooms available at the *pension*. I did not like the idea of losing my privacy, but I found it difficult to say that outright to Mára, so she moved in. I had no inkling that she had usurped my position as Vidkun's wife, and I felt so isolated from everyone I knew in Norway and Russia that I was genuinely glad to see her, my only link with Kharkov and my native land.

I wanted to do everything in my power to make Mára's stay in Paris enjoyable, especially because she said that this was her first time outside of Russia and on her own. She felt lonely and helpless, she said, and also complained constantly of the difficulties she was having because she did not know French. I tried to arrange for lessons with a Sorbonne professor who was considered exceptionally good and popular with foreigners, and I introduced her to my new friends at the *pension*. Although they could not communicate with her very well, they accepted her into their company. A couple of times, they invited us both out, and we all pretended to have a good time, with me acting as interpreter and with Mára resorting to pantomime, much as I had often done in Norway a year earlier.

She was completely dependent on me in her relations with the other guests at the *pension*, with the exception of Vidi. But Vidi, in her exquisitely polite and cool way, kept Mára at a distance, and Mára, for her part, tried to avoid her, probably sensing her disapproval.

I could see that Mára was somehow different from the woman I had got to know only a few months earlier in Kharkov. For one

thing, she was even better dressed than before and, for another, her manner was much livelier. I thought this last might be the result of her need to compensate for her language handicap, but I soon found out that she was not nearly as helpless as she at first would have me think. She also appeared to have a lot of money, which she spent on herself quite freely. When she realized that I had noticed this, she told me that she now had a good salary and an ample expense account for her trip abroad.

She had some addresses and letters of introduction to officials at the Soviet Trade Mission and at the League of Nations Secretariat, and soon she was going about town alone by taxi to see these people on what she claimed was official business. One day she brought home a young Armenian who spoke good Russian, whom she said she had met at a White Russian restaurant she had visited in order to avoid the French food at the *pension*. He was a dark, good-looking fellow, very polite and quiet, and he followed Mára everywhere like a dog, evidently serving as her interpreter.

He told me he was studying acting at a Paris drama school run by White Russian émigré actors. I did not doubt his story, for just as when Vidi had been thrown upon her own resources, the only permanent jobs available to foreigners in France were as independent entrepreneurs, such as shopkeepers, taxi drivers, restaurant owners, writers, publishers, doctors, lawyers, dancers, actors, or other artists. Almost everybody of importance in Russian science, art, literature, and other arts forms had done their best to escape from Russia, so the two million White Russian emigrants now dispersed around the world in large measure constituted the flower of the Russian intelligentsia and artistic world, and they had much to teach others.

Mára stayed in Paris for about three weeks, but I never did learn anything specific about her "official business." Before she left for

Vienna, where she was to join Vidkun, she borrowed my best suitcase, and I never got it back. But I could not know that then, of course, so I said goodbye to her in as friendly a fashion as I had done a couple of months earlier, when she showed up at the railroad station in Kharkov along with so many others on the day that Vidkun and I left.

I even promised to write to her while she was in Vienna, and I hoped she would write me back, serving as an extra source of news about my elusive husband.

When Mára left, I was poorer than ever, and I finally gathered enough courage to write to Vidkun and ask him for my allowance. But I received no reply, and that worried me not a little.

Fortunately, life at the *pension* was now back on its comfortable track. Even if I did not have any money, I had at least regained the privacy of my room and the peace and quiet I needed to think about the events of the past several weeks and to consider my relationship with Vidkun and Mára. I tried to persuade myself that it was perfectly normal for me to be where I was, for Vidkun to be someplace else entirely, and for Mára to descend on me as if we were bosom friends and then go off to meet my husband in Vienna. But at the back of my mind, I knew that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

My suspicion was confirmed not long after Mára had left for Vienna, when I received a letter of warning from my old friend Zhósy Bortz in Kharkov, who knew that Mára had gone first to France and then to join Vidkun. For the sake of putting me on my guard, he disregarded the considerable risk he was running by telling me that Mára was a Soviet agent who had gone behind my back while I was in the Crimea, and who was now using Vidkun for her own ends. The information he gave me was so privileged that it is clear to me now that my old friend must already have been well up the ladder of success, which, by 1929,

saw him as the legal counsel of MODPIC (The Moscow Society of Dramatic Playwrights and Composers).⁴

Although I was too politically ignorant to understand the full implications of what Zhósyá had written, I had many anxious days while I thought about his warning. I did not want to do anything foolish because if I brought unfounded accusations against Vidkun and Mára, I was afraid I might do further harm to his and my relationship. At the same time, I had to admit to myself that Mára might be dangerous.

Then I finally received a letter mailed from Vienna saying that Mára, and probably also Vidkun, might be expected back in Paris by the middle of January. The realization that Vidkun would probably be reading all the letters I wrote to Mára provided a fresh stab to my already wounded pride. Hot jealousy welled up inside me at the memory of what Zhósyá had written and at the thought that my husband was now traveling around with Mára, leaving me to face a lonely Christmas holiday. Thoroughly upset, I took out my stationery and wrote to Mára on December 17, 1923:

My dear girl of my own, you cannot imagine how awfully glad I was to read your letter and to learn that you soon will be with us. I received the letter at the dinner table, and I gave such a shout of joy that the two persons whose seats are across the table from me thought I had lost my mind. I shall not mention to you the names of these persons, you will guess them yourself; I cannot write their last names because Mushka may soon come and see that I am writing his surname. Today there was another concert, one of the friends played the piano. Naturally, Mushka sang and declaimed as usual, now the guests are gone, I have

4. Note by Alexandra V. Yourieff: In his position as legal counsel to MOD-PIC, "Jóseph Miháilovich Borts" in 1929 negotiated with Vladimir Mayakovsky for the production of his new drama "The Bedbug." (Bengt Jangfeldt, ed., *Vladimir Majakovskij and Lili Brik: Correspondence 1915–1930*. Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Upsala 1982, pp. 184, 274–5.)

my door open. I can hear how he is humming something or other. I can feel he is coming. Yesterday, I, Lilly and Mushka went to a marvelous little inn in order to drink champagne. He was charming in a dinner jacket and quite stylish, as they say. On our way back I felt somewhat dizzy. The day before yesterday we went to the cinema and then to a restaurant, we kidded around and laughed like crazy. I do not want to dwell on it long, when you come, you will find out yourself. And how happy our knights are that you are coming, I cannot express either. Lilly is in the seventh heaven. Everyone in the house is glad that you will again be among us, the Norwegians every day crowd around with questions about you. Madame Glaize has already reserved a room for you, and the Professor has written you down on his list of female students from January 15, you may study every day. Everything has been arranged and now he is only waiting and waiting for you. Wire the exact time of your arrival, we shall come and meet you.

What a pity we are not spending our holidays together, I miss you awfully already, how could you think I would not be glad about your arriving.

When you come, I shall tell you about the gossipy rumors that have reached Paris from Kharkov, rather curious, I laughed like crazy. They write that you work for some Trust, but under somebody's omnipotent protection. And poisonously they report—I quote—that when I was in the Crimea, you were seen several times with the Captain. Aha . . . but how dared you [suddenly the formal *vy* is employed], Madam, to promenade with my husband, just wait until you [again *vy*, rather than the informal *ty*] come to Paris, then I shall raise a nice scandal with you, you won't be glad of it [still using *vy*].

Today I received a cable from you with an address from Bucharest, but I do not know whether it is possible to send a letter to you there. I prefer sending this letter to Sofia, because I am afraid you are setting out earlier. My loving felicitations for the holidays; wish you everything good. I fondly kiss you and my unfaithful husband Vidkun. I am expecting you. Yet again I kiss you.

Your Acia

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It is a mercy that one never knows what the future may bring. When I wrote my letter to Mára just before my first Christmas in Paris, little did I suspect that my life was heading for rougher waters still. I thought that soon the veil of uncertainty and misunderstanding would be lifted, and that somehow I would resume a normal life with my husband. A life with no room for Mára.