

PAGEANT

April-May 1948

I WAS A MEMBER OF STALIN'S HOUSEHOLD



**How does the ruler of
the Soviet Union
get along with his family?
The author of this intimate
article spent six months
in Stalin's home.**

Until . . .

BY PAULINE LABRANCHE

WHAT KIND OF a father is Joseph Stalin, ruler of the Soviet Union? How does he get along with his family? How does he treat them?

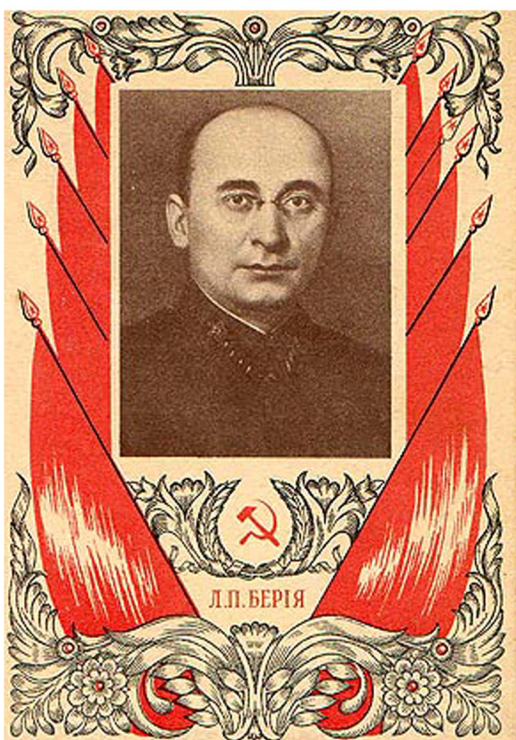
I can tell you. Because for many months I was the French tutor of Stalin's daughter Svetlana, at Stalin's country home. I met Stalin himself numerous times.

Svetlana was 19 years old when I first saw her in 1945 at the house of her father in the Kremlin. She is a buxom, dark-haired girl with typical Slav features, and she is rather pretty. She is most unlike her famous father. For one thing, she is warm. She is confiding.

My husband and I had been living in Russia for almost 20 years. He worked as chief engineer in a Moscow automobile factory. He was away from home most of the time. To keep myself occupied—and not so lonesome—I had begun to teach French in 1945 to Russian boys and girls. I am a Parisian.

One of my pupils was the nephew of Maxim Kaganovitch, former Commissar for Heavy Industries. Kaganovitch is Stalin's brother-in-law. The boy must have spoken about me to his uncle, for one day in July 1945 two officers of the NKVD, the Secret Police, called on me at my house. They asked me to see Lavrenty Pavelitch Beria, Commissar for Internal Affairs. I did.

STALIN'S HOUSEHOLD



Lavrenty Pavelitch Beria

Beria is a man of about 45, tall, bald, spectacled, civil and well-mannered. He is one of the best-educated men in the Kremlin—and one of the most powerful.

"You have been invited to teach Marshal Stalin's daughter, Svetlana," he said to me in a low, slow voice. "This is a most flattering offer. You cannot possibly refuse."

I didn't even want to refuse. I was thrilled beyond words.

Three days later one of Beria's right-hand men came to fetch me to the Kremlin. He brought me a special-permission card, the so-called Kremlin Pass. Our car was stopped every hundred yards. The guards all knew my escort, but strict regulations forced them, one group after another, to inspect my passport. Even before I had met Stalin for the first time, I realized the truth of the saying that he is the most inaccessible ruler in the world.

Stalin's home, situated in the very heart of the giant fortress that is called the Kremlin, is a rather drab one-story building that contains only eight rooms. My escort took me to the doorstep of the house, and left me there facing an unsmiling woman about 40 years old. I learned later that this was Rafaelowna Kagushi, Svetlana's personal bodyguard, who was a former captain in the Moscow police force. She inspected me and my passport. Then she led me inside to meet Svetlana.

The girl seemed pleased that I had come. It was plain that she took an instant liking to me. She told me that she would expect me every day except Sunday and

STALIN'S HOUSEHOLD

Thursday at her father's country home, and that she would send a car to bring me there. I learned later that Thursday was the day Stalin spent in the country with his family.

Stalin's country estate lies in a big park about 30 miles northeast of Moscow. A special detachment of the Secret Police guards it day and night; Georgian servants who speak to Stalin in his native language staff the place. The house is beautifully furnished. It has all the comforts of a small palace.

I had been to Stalin's house ten or eleven times before I met the Man of Steel, though Svetlana's stepmother, a plump, unattractive woman of 50, turned up frequently.

One day Stalin entered the room where Svetlana and I were memorizing French verbs. He seemed surprised to find a stranger there. He stared at me in an unfriendly way between narrowed lids.

Svetlana, nervous and very ill at ease, hastened to say a few explanatory words. Stalin simply turned on his heel and left the room.

"He does not like to see strangers here," the girl explained.

I believe Stalin's avoidance of strangers is chiefly due to his fear of an attempt on his life. Svetlana once told me that he wears steel undergarments whenever he appears in public, to protect him against pistol shots. "But this is secret," she added hastily. "You must never speak about it."

I met the Marshal several times, and in the end he seemed to get used to my presence at teatime. But he always ignored me completely, just as he ignored the presence of servants or guards.

Stalin looks much shorter and older than his pictures suggest. He was often pale, worn-out, weary. There were rumors in Moscow at the time that he was suffering from heart attacks. He was 65 when I first saw him. He showed the strains of the hard war years.

The master of Russia ruled his family with an iron hand. His nearest relatives were overawed by him. They did not even dare speak to him unless he indicated in his gruff manner that he wished them to do so. He got angry easily, and I have heard him giving a terrible tongue-lashing to a Georgian servant. He did not think much of Svetlana's French lessons.

"You should be learning to make

STALIN'S HOUSEHOLD

lobjo instead," he once growled at the girl. Lobjo is a Georgian national dish.

One little incident stands out in my memory. His face, one day, became distorted by pain; his hand went to his waist. Hastily, he drew a small glass bottle from his pocket and took some pills. His wife and his daughter ignored all this, apparently because he wanted them to, but I could see that they were worried. I kept my eyes turned away throughout the tableau, but I could see what was happening, in a mirror.

As unexpectedly as he had entered the room, he left again—silent, strange. In spite of his age, he always gave the impression of tremendous power.

From the day of my first visit to Beria, my husband and I were watched by the Secret Police. Our house was under constant observation. I had become a very important person, a temporary member of Stalin's household. Every step I took was reported at once to the Secret Police chief.

Misha, our old gardener, suddenly disappeared. His place was taken by an elderly man who had been recommended to us by my husband's manager. His name was Rushkin. Later on I was to learn that he was a major in the Special Service Group of the Secret Police, a member of the force that watches over Stalin's safety. Both my husband and I soon got used to having Secret Police agents, both men and women, follow us wherever we went.

During our first interview, Beria had warned me, "Don't ask any questions about Stalin. Better, don't ask any questions at all." I was grateful for this piece of advice. Stalin's movements are the most closely guarded secret in the Soviet Union. I remember Svetlana's strange and worried expression when I mentioned to her quite casually one day that I had not seen her father for some time.

One day in November 1945, Svetlana took me to the room that Stalin used as his office; she wanted to show me a painting of her mother. I stood on the threshold, unwilling to enter the room, and looked at a large painting of a beautiful woman. It faced the door. She had lovely eyes and a delicate mouth. Coils of long auburn hair fell around her neck.

STALIN'S HOUSEHOLD

"That is my real mother," Svetlana said softly.

Nadezhda Alleluyevna was Stalin's second wife—and his great love. In order to marry her he had divorced his first wife in 1919, by mail. Nadezhda was the mother of Svetlana and her brother Vassily. There is a son by the first marriage, but Stalin rarely sees him.

I had watched Nadezhda's funeral in 1932, on a cold, bleak, sad November day. The Red flag was flying from the Kremlin. Late in the day a small coffin, covered with red silk and placed upon a red-lacquered catafalque, was drawn by six black horses through the snowy streets of the capital, which were guarded by Secret Police on horseback. A band slowly played the Internationale.

Nadezhda, daughter of a Tiflis locksmith who had been a neighbor of Stalin's father, was the only love of Stalin's life. Her death was a terrible blow to him. There was something puzzling, mystifying about the manner of her dying. Two days previously she was seen at the Moscow Opera House, yet the newspaper *Izvestia* made reference to her prolonged illness.

Now I stood looking at her picture, painted by the famous Russian artist Burin.

"Mother loved father very much," said Svetlana to me. "She was always worried about his health. She tasted everything that was cooked for him an hour before he ate it."

"She is beautiful," I said. "She is dreamlike."

Then I had a feeling that some one was standing behind me. I turned quickly—and met Stalin's furious stare. There was a cold glint in his eye.

"Get out of here, both of you," he commanded.

We left, both trembling. Svetlana was as pale as death.

In the evening of the same day, Beria telephoned me. "There will be no further lessons," he said. "You are not to come to the house any more."

I held my breath.

"But can't I see Svetlana to say good by?" I gasped.

"No. You are not to communicate with the house again."

That was the end of it all. I expected Svetlana to write to me, but there was no letter. If she did write, the letter was stopped. A handsome check reached me two

STALIN'S HOUSEHOLD

days later.

The Secret Police continued to watch us. Our detective-gardener carried on for three months more.

In 1946 my husband died after a long illness. I decided to return home to France. I was deathly afraid that there would be difficulties of some sort, but the Secret Police seemed to realize by then that I was no conspirator. They made it very easy for me, so that I finally left Russia early in 1947.

I often think that my admiring remarks about Nadezhda, which were of course overheard by Stalin, had somehow made things easier for me. But why had he been so upset, so angry? Was it merely because we had opened the door to his private office? That I'll never know.

But I cannot forget Svetlana's words, that her mother tasted everything before her father ate it. Was that the explanation for Nadezhda's sudden death? Had she paid with her life for her love, for the privilege of protecting Stalin?

Only the Man of Steel knows.

PAGEANT

OldMagazineArticles.com