

GOD, AMERICA, AND APPLE PIE

THE DRAMATIC DEFECTION TO AND DEATH OF STALIN'S DAUGHTER IN AMERICA

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Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, arrives at JFK airport in 1967.

Cold War America scored a major PR coup when the only daughter of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin defected to the United States.



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Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin is generally considered one of history's worst tyrants, responsible for millions of civilian deaths. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his only daughter, Svetlana, found it extraordinarily difficult growing up in the Kremlin under his care. Though Stalin purportedly doted on her, giving her presents, showing her Hollywood movies, and calling her "little sparrow," family conflict and tragedy predominated. She suffered her first major heartbreak at age 6, when her mother died of what she was told was appendicitis, but which turned out to have been a suicide.

Not long afterward, during the so-called Great Terror of the 1930s, Stalin ordered the arrest of her beloved aunt and uncle for being "enemies of the people."

They, along with another of Svetlana's uncles, were later executed, and other family members and friends were imprisoned. To make matters worse, her brother died of alcoholism, and her half-brother was captured by the Nazis during World War II and subsequently killed after Stalin refused to exchange him for a German general.

Meanwhile, even as the Nazi invasion of 1941 threatened to bring about his downfall, Stalin found time to micromanage Svetlana's career and dating life. He forbid her from studying literature at Moscow State University and, upon discovering she had a Jewish boyfriend more than 20 years her senior, slapped her twice across the face, in addition to shipping her boyfriend off to an Arctic labor camp. Her world grew darker in her father's last years. Nikita S. Khrushchev, Stalin's successor as Soviet leader, wrote in his memoirs about the New Year's party in 1952 when Stalin grabbed Svetlana by the hair and forced her to dance.



Joseph Stalin with daughter Svetlana and son Vasily.



Svetlana Alliluyeva in 1969.

The increasingly anti-Semitic Stalin didn't take it much better when told she wanted to wed a second Jewish man, a college classmate. Though he grudgingly approved the marriage, he vowed never to meet the husband. (That relationship soon ended in divorce, as did a second marriage to the son of one of Stalin's closest confidants.)

Seeking to escape her past, Svetlana changed her surname from Stalina to Alliluyeva, her mother's maiden name, following Stalin's death. But the state continued to interfere in her affairs, refusing, for example, to let her marry Brajesh Singh, an Indian Communist who had fallen in love with her during a trip to Moscow for medical treatment in the 1960s.

When Singh died of a respiratory illness in 1966, the Soviet authorities reluctantly allowed Alliluyeva—who had only been abroad one other time—to visit India so that she could scatter his ashes into the sacred Ganges River. However, they rejected her attempt to stay in the country indefinitely. On the evening of March 6, 1967, just two days prior to her scheduled return flight to Moscow, she impulsively decided that she'd had enough.

Taking a taxi from the Soviet embassy guesthouse in New Delhi to the nearby U.S. embassy, she submitted a formal request for political asylum and met with a diplomat who tried to ascertain whether she really could be Stalin's daughter. The diplomat checked with Washington and learned that no one—not even the CIA—had any record of Alliluyeva's existence. Yet embassy officials decided to help her anyway, stamping her passport with a tourist visa and escorting her to the airport, where she boarded the next available international flight (which happened to go to Rome).

By the time the Soviets realized Alliluyeva had gone missing, it was too late to do anything about it, *though they did allegedly discuss assassination plans that were never put into action.*



Svetlana Alliluyeva on Long Island after seeking political asylum in the United States.

With only a small suitcase to her name, Alliluyeva remained holed up in Geneva, Switzerland, for the next few weeks while the U.S. authorities debated what to do with her. Some opposed abetting her defection for fear it would worsen U.S.-Soviet relations, but President Lyndon B. Johnson ultimately decided to take her in on humanitarian grounds. Though the administration preferred to have her arrive without fanfare, a scrum of reporters greeted her at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport when her plane touched down on April 21, 1967, and even more reporters showed up for a press conference a few days later.

Denouncing her father as a "moral and spiritual monster," Alliluyeva burned her Soviet passport and declared that she finally felt "able to fly out free, like a bird." At first, life in the United States appeared to suit her. She became a citizen, published two memoirs that made her a millionaire, married an associate of architect Frank Lloyd Wright (which, like her other marriages, quickly ended in divorce) and changed her name a second time to the American-sounding Lana Peters. She moreover embraced American culture, writing, for instance, that Thanksgiving was a "marvelous substitute for the state-run Fifty-Year Jubilee of the October Revolution!"



Svetlana Alliluyeva, then known as Lana Peters, in 1989 near her Long Island home.

Alas, her honeymoon with the United States did not last. As public interest in her waned, her writing career stalled. She also squandered her fortune, alienated many friends, and never really settled anywhere, bouncing back and forth between Arizona, New Jersey, California and Wisconsin, as well as several countries in Europe. "Mom used to move around every year, sometimes twice in a year," her American-born daughter told a reporter.

Ms. Peters was said to have lived in a cabin with no electricity in northern Wisconsin, another time, in a Roman Catholic convent in Switzerland. In 1992, she was reported to be living in a shabby part of West London in a home for elderly people with emotional problems.

In 1984, Alliluyeva even moved back to the Soviet Union, claiming that she had not known a single day of freedom in the West and that she had been a pet of the CIA. But she again grew disillusioned with the USSR and in 1986 returned to the United States, where she disavowed her previous anti-American statements. "You can't regret your fate," Alliluyeva once said, "although I do regret my mother didn't marry a carpenter."

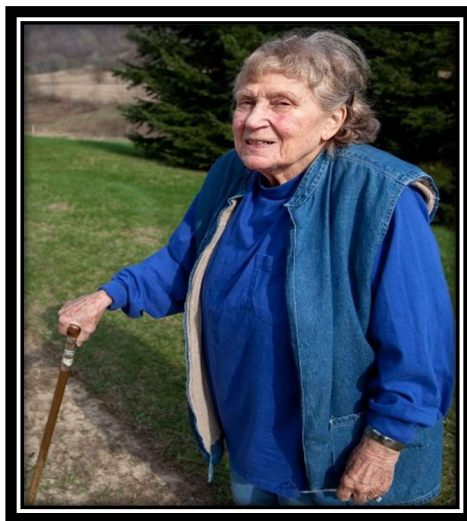
She lived out her final years in a Wisconsin nursing home before dying of colon cancer in 2011 at the age of 85.

Her death, like the last years of her life, occurred away from public view. There were hints of it online and in Richland Center, the Wisconsin town in which she lived, though a local funeral home said to be managing the burial would not confirm the death. A county official in Wisconsin thought she might have died several months ago. Phone calls seeking information from a surviving daughter, Olga Peters, who now goes by the name Chrese Evans, were rebuffed, as were efforts to speak to her in person in Portland, Ore., where she lives and works.

Ms. Peter's initial prominence came only from being Stalin's daughter, a distinction that fed public curiosity about her life across three continents and many decades. She said she hated her past and felt like a slave to extraordinary circumstances. Yet she drew on that past, and the infamous Stalin name, in writing two best-selling autobiographies.

But she could never forgive her father's cruelty to her. "He broke my life," she said. "I want to explain to you. He broke my life."

And he left a shadow from which she could never emerge. "Wherever I go," she said, "here, or Switzerland, or India, or wherever. Australia or some island. I will always be a political prisoner of my father's name."



Ms. Peters was photographed last year (2010, a year before she died) in Wisconsin.

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