

Reunion with Yura

Anna Larina

The early months of 1937 in Moscow were a dark time for the Bukharin family, Nikolai, Anna and their baby son Yura, as Stalin's show trials engulfed more victims. The trial of the so-called Parallel Trotskyist Centre took place at the end of January, and Sokolnikov and Radek were sentenced to 10 years each. Nikolai Bukharin 'assumed that they had saved their skins by maligning him,' according to his young wife, Anna Larina, in her Memoirs. On 27 February, Bukharin didn't return home from the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. With Rykov, he had been arrested on the spot and charged with treason. Bukharin's show trial (with 20 others) and judicial murder followed in 1938. Anna Larina describes how her family was torn apart during those turbulent months, and what happened when she met her son again two decades later, in 1956.

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I was parted from my son when he was a year old and did not see him again for nineteen years. In the summer of 1956, the twenty-year-old man came to see me in my last place of exile: Tisul settlement, Kemerovo Region, Siberia.

I hope the reader will forgive me – if indeed I ever have a reader one day – for momentarily digressing from my recollections of dreadful days to skip ahead almost two decades. I will return to the Kremlin again to say good-bye to Nikolai Ivanovich [Bukharin, her husband and Yuri's father]. The history of our parting will not drop into the River Lethe, for it lives in my soul, in my memory.

But I feel the need for a little bit of

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happiness, and could the meeting with Yura I had dreamed about so long be anything but happiness after such an extended separation? Sergo Ordzhonikidze could not save him, but one way or another the boy's relatives saved him, each in turn, and he did not perish in the children's home. Praised be the people for that! But let me tell about this reunion with my son.

By that time, I had a new family. Actually, that statement is a bit misleading. I met the man who would become my second husband, Fyodor Dmitriyevich Fadeyev, in a camp. Before his arrest, he had headed the agro-production department on the Commissariat of State Farms in Kazakhstan. After his release and rehabilitation, he was not an exile but stayed in Siberia on my account. Because of this connection with me, he was arrested three times on various pretexts. Therefore, for the better part of our life together, Fyodor Dmitriyevich was either in prison or working far away and could come to see me only on vacations. After my release from camp in 1945, I scraped out a living in various places of exile with our two small children. Since my husband had been educated at the Agricultural Academy in two departments, agronomy and animal husbandry, and had worked in agriculture for many years, he could always find work in my latest place of exile. State farms were all around; it was not hard to get a job. But no sooner did he start work than he was arrested, or I was sent off to another place of exile.

These years form a separate chapter of my life, also filled with drama, but this memoir is not the place to give it full treatment. When the political climate warmed in 1956, it seemed that Fyodor Dmitriyevich and I might settle down permanently together, but he died prematurely. Exhausted by eight years of confinement, plus an investigation that used torture to extract a self-indictment, he was unable to withstand the subsequent strains of life associated with me. As I say, this story deserves its own telling. I touch on it here only to explain that in 1956 there was a whole family eager to meet Yura.

Tisul settlement was located some forty to forty-five kilometres from the nearest train station, Tyazhin, and there was no regularly scheduled transportation between them. We set out on the road in a motorcycle with a sidecar. We had to take the children – Nadya, not yet ten, and Misha, six – because they were determined to see their brother right away. For them, this event was simply an enjoyable adventure. They had to squeeze into the sidecar, producing a drag on the vehicle that caused an accident and nearly got us all killed. But we finally made it to that station.

It is difficult to convey my state of mind. I was about to see my son, but

he was an unknown young man. What kind of person would he be, after being brought up in a children's home? Would we find a common language? Would he be able to understand me? Would he consider my having other children as a betrayal to himself, and reproach me? Finally, he would certainly ask me about his father, who the man was. Indeed, this was my main concern. Must I reveal that secret, would it not prove too great a burden for a youthful spirit? This was after the Twentieth Party Congress, where Khrushchev had given his secret speech against Stalin's crimes, so I had armed myself with newspaper clippings about 'Stalin's cult of personality'. It seemed to me then, and still does now, that the phrase hardly does justice to the crimes he committed, or adequately conveys that time to later generations, or explains the horror experienced by our country, but it was at least a step towards the truth, towards the future, and it lightened my task. Also, not long before Yura's arrival, I managed to buy a copy of Lenin's testament, his 1923 'Letter to the Congress', in which he had mentioned Bukharin so warmly. It had just been published for the first time as a separate booklet and was available at newsstands. In short, I tried to be well fortified. Dozens of questions occurred to me that I could not answer until I had made the acquaintance of my son.

As my new family and I walked along the station platform, I saw the train approaching from the distance. I became so excited I thought I might fall down at any moment; I walked over to a little hedgerow beside the platform and fainted. As it happened, this was not Yura's train, and by the time the one with him aboard drew into the station, I had 'come to'. I tried to take in the entire trainload of passengers with one glance, fearful I would miss my son. Since I had nothing but his baby pictures all these years, I had no idea how he would look. Suddenly, I felt an embrace and a kiss. Yura had rushed up to me from the side while I was intently examining the last cars of the train.

I could recognize nothing but his eyes, the same shining eyes from his childhood. How he had picked me out, I do not know. He had not seen my photograph since he was a child; my look of anticipation must have given me away. He was indescribably thin, his bony hips hardly held up his pants, and every rib of his chest could be counted. The very image of Mahatma Gandhi. I peered into his face, searching for the family features so well known to me. The moment he spoke, my heart stopped: the timbre of his voice, his gestures, and the expression of his eyes were exactly like his father's. But the colour of his eyes was more like mine, dark brown, though they had been quite light when I last saw them.

'Well, well, Yurochka! Well, well!'

At first, I could think of nothing else to say. And he:

‘Now I know where my skinniness comes from.’

Indeed, I was not much stouter than Yura.

We got back to Tisul by evening, thoroughly worn out by a bumpy ride on the motorcycle.

The next day passed quietly. Yura was happy. He sang songs, he ran with the children to the vegetable garden for pea pods. That morning, when we had a breakfast of farina with raspberry jam, he asked Misha, ‘Well, now, tell me, who used to eat farina with raspberry jam?’ Misha thought a moment and answered uncertainly, ‘It must be Lenin’. We laughed. And Yura told his little brother that it was Pinocchio [in the Russian version by Aleksei Tolstoi].

Thus passed the first day of our life together – a happy, bright, remarkably easy day. As if a stone had been lifted from my heart.

I got to know my son, asked what interested him, inquired why he had gone to study at the Novochoerkassk Waterworks Institute. I wondered whether it was because of an interest in the natural sciences or in mathematics. I told him that his grandfather Ivan Gavrilovich was a mathematician who once taught in a girls’ school. I did not mention his father’s enthusiasm for the natural sciences, not wanting to bring up the subject of Bukharin yet. I was curious to know what proclivities my son might have inherited.

Yura explained that he was studying at the Waterworks Institute purely by chance. The boys from the orphanage had gone to take the entrance examination, and he just went along. He passed and enrolled but really had no interest in the subject, which had to do with irrigation, draining of swamps, and other water-related projects. He mentioned that he had taken the exam barefoot.

‘Why barefoot?’ I asked in surprise. ‘Didn’t they give you shoes in the children’s home?’

‘They did, but it felt freer and easier without them.’

So it seemed that neither the natural sciences nor mathematics interested him. Instead, he liked drawing and dreamed of becoming an artist, an ambition he would eventually realise. But, still wary of topics connected with his father, I kept to myself the thought that Yura had inherited his love of art from Nikolai Ivanovich.

Still, the following day I could not avoid the painful question, although

I had intended to put off as long as I could a conversation that would undoubtedly be difficult for me. I would have to tell my son not only who his father was but also, or so I assumed, where he was. Yura insistently kept asking:

‘Mama, tell me, who is my father?’

‘Well, what do you think, Yurochka? Who could your father be?’

‘He must be some professor,’ Yura responded. This surmise amused me.

‘Not a professor, but an academician.’

‘An academician, even! My father’s an academician, and I’m an idiot,’ said Yura.

Yura was by no means ‘an idiot’; on the contrary, considering the circumstances in which he had grown up, his level of development astonished me.

‘But mainly,’ I said, ‘he was not an academician.’ (After all, I had mentioned that Nikolai Ivanovich was an academician only because Yura had guessed that his father was ‘some professor’.) ‘Mainly, he was a famous political figure.’

‘Tell me his name.’

‘That I’ll tell you tomorrow.’

I imagined that if I pronounced the name, Yura would cry, ‘So it’s Bukharin, that enemy of the people!’ I became afraid.

‘If you don’t want to tell me now,’ Yura said, ‘let’s do it this way: I’ll try to name him myself, and you’ll tell me if I get it right.’

On the assumption that he would never guess correctly, I agreed, taking his proposal for a funny little game that would delay the inevitable. But Yura surprised me:

‘I suppose that my father is Bukharin.’

I looked at my son in amazement.

‘If you knew, why did you ask me?’

‘I didn’t know; honestly, I didn’t know.’

‘Then how were you able to guess?’

‘I did it by the process of elimination. You said my grandfather was Ivan Gavrilovich, my father was a prominent political figure. So I started thinking: which one of the leading political figures had the patronymic Ivanovich? And I came to the conclusion that it was Bukharin – Nikolai *Ivanovich*.’

I was impressed that he knew the given names and patronymics of the major political figures, Lenin’s comrades-in-arms, and could name them all (except Aleksei Rykov, who was also *Ivanovich*). He did not know that Bukharin had been the youngest of them, which would have given him another clue. The difference in age between Nikolai Ivanovich and myself, in fact, did not occur to him. Difficult as it may be to believe, this scene occurred exactly as I have described it. Yet I do not rule out the possibility that his infant memory had registered his father’s name when some relative or other mentioned it, then in this moment of nervous tension an echo of the name had popped into his head.

I showed Yura the newspaper clippings and Lenin’s testament. I spoke a bit about his father, and for his own good avoided going into too much detail. Before Yura left us, I asked him not to disclose his real family name, fearing this would only bring additional difficulties to a life that was already far from easy.

At the children’s home, he had been given a passport in the family name of the relatives from whom he had been taken. Thus he had become Yury Borisovich Gusman, even though he had not been officially adopted. After meeting with me, however, he found it hard to keep his background secret. Not long before his graduation at officer’s rank from the Waterworks Institute, Yura had to fill out a very detailed questionnaire. He was troubled, because it struck him now that to maintain silence about his father was intentional withholding of information. He wrote to me asking permission to reveal the truth; he also needed his father’s year of birth, as well as mine, neither of which he knew. The questionnaire had to be filled out within two weeks, no later, but Yura’s letter had taken so long to arrive that I sent him a telegram in order to meet the deadline. I gave him his father’s family name, given name, patronymic and year of birth, along with the year of my birth, thereby granting him permission to reveal his heritage ...