



SVETLANA
ALLILUYEVA

twenty letters to a friend

Twenty Letters to a Friend



Translated by Priscilla Johnson McMillan

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Designed by The Etheredges

»» *Twenty Letters to a Friend*

Svetlana Alliluyeva

» *To My Mother*

»» *Author's Note*

These letters were written during the summer of 1963 in the village of Zhukovka, outside Moscow. The writing took thirty-five days. The free letter form enabled me to be completely candid. I believe that I am, in a way, bearing witness.

It did not occur to me at the time that the book I was writing might be published.

Now that I am able to publish it, I have left it just as it was although it is four years later and I am far from Russia. Apart from necessary corrections, nonsubstantive cuts and the addition of footnotes while I was preparing the manuscript for publication, the book remains as it was when it was read by my friends in Moscow. I should like the reader of these letters to feel that they were written to him.

SVETLANA ALLILUYEVA

*Locust Valley, New York
May, 1967*

» *Twenty Letters to a Friend*



The New York Times

»» *Introduction*

July 16, 1963

It's quiet here. Moscow, breathing fire like a human volcano with its smoldering lava of passion, ambition and politics, its hurly-burly of meetings and entertainment, Moscow is less than twenty miles away. There is a World Congress of Women, a World Film Festival, talks with China and news from all over the world morning, noon and night. Some visitors from Hungary have arrived. Movie actors from everywhere in the world are exploring the city. African women are buying souvenirs at GUM.^{1*} Red Square is full of men and women of all races. Each one has brought a singular destiny of his own, his own character and soul.

Moscow seethes and bubbles and gasps for air. It's always thirsting for something new, the newest events, the latest sensation. Everyone wants to be the first to know. It's the rhythm of life today.

[* Superior numbers refer to Translator's Notes, beginning on p. 237.]

Here, it is quiet.

Evening sun lights the grass and the woods with gold. These woods are a small oasis between Odintsovo, Barvikha and Romashkovo, an oasis where roads and *dachas* aren't built any more, where the woods have been cleared, the grass is mowed in the clearings and the underbrush cut away. People come here from Moscow to relax. On radio and television they keep saying the best way to relax on your day off is to hike with a knapsack and walking stick from Odintsovo to Usovo or Ilyinskoye, to walk the paths through our splendid forest across ravines and clearings and groves of birch. The visitor from Moscow has only to spend three or four hours roaming the forest and breathing its air to feel cured, strengthened, reborn, rested from all his cares. He puts a faded bouquet of wildflowers onto the rack of the electric train and goes back to the teeming streets of Moscow. For a long time after that he'll advise everyone he knows to spend Sunday hiking in the woods. Sooner or later they'll all go by on the path, past my fence and the house I live in.

I've lived in these woods and this part of the world all my thirty-seven years. What difference does it make that my life and these houses have changed? The woods are still the same. Usovo is in the same place, and the village of Kolchuga and the hill above it from which you can see in every direction. The villages are the same, too. The villagers still draw their water from wells and do their cooking on kerosene stoves. Cows still low and hens cluck inside the village huts. Yet television antennas stick up from the gray, tumbledown roofs, and the girls wear nylon blouses and sandals from Hungary. A good deal is changing even here, but the grass and the birch forest have the same sweet smell as you get off the train, the golden pines are just the same and the same country roads go off to Petrovskoye and Znamenskoye. This is my home.

This is where I belong—not in the city or the Kremlin, which I cannot stand and where I lived for twenty-five years. And when I die, let them bury me in the ground here in Romashkovo, in the graveyard by the station, on the little hill. There's a feeling of space there; there are fields and sky. There's a nice old church on the hill. True, it's not used any more and it's falling down and the trees have grown up rank in the enclosure around it, but it stands splendid in the dense greenery and goes on all the same serving the cause of everlasting good on earth. Let them bury me there. I don't want to be in the city for anything. I would suffocate there.

I'm telling you this, my friend, so that you shall know. You want to know all about me. Then you should know this, too.

You say you want to know everything about me and the life I led, everything I knew and saw around me. A lot of it was interesting, of course. But what happened isn't nearly so important as what one thinks about it now. Would you like to join me as I think?

I shall write you about everything. The one good thing about not seeing you is that I can write you letters. I shall not see you for five weeks, my friend, who understand and want to know everything.

This will be one long letter to you. You'll find all kinds of things here—portraits, sketches, life stories, love, nature, well-known events both great and small, my own thoughts about them, the remarks and opinions of friends and everybody else I knew. It will be a varied, untidy tale and it will all pour out unexpectedly, for this is what my life was like.

Please don't think I look on my life as anything special. On the contrary, the life I've led has been unusually dull and monotonous for one of my generation. Maybe it hasn't even begun yet. Maybe when I've written it all down, an unbear-

able burden of some kind will fall from my shoulders at last and then my real life will begin. I'm secretly counting on this. It's the hope I cherish in my heart. I've grown so weary of this weight. Maybe I shall be able to throw it off at last.

Most of my generation have had much fuller lives than I, particularly the ones who are five or six years older. They're the ones who went fearlessly and eagerly straight from their classrooms to the war. Few of them survived. Those who did are the flower of our time. They are the Decembrists of tomorrow—they will yet teach all of us how we must live. They will have their say, of this I am certain. Russia is so hungry for a word of wisdom and longs for new words and deeds.

I shall never catch up with them. I have no great deeds to my credit; I've never been an actor on center stage. All my life was spent behind the scenes. But, you ask, isn't it interesting there, too?

It's dark behind the scenes. You can see the audience applauding, open-mouthed with delight, following the speeches and blinded by the multicolored lights and the scenery. You can see the actors, too, playing their roles as Czars, gods, servants and extras. You can see whether they're acting or whether they're talking with one another naturally. There's a smell of mice and glue and old sets. But what an interesting place it is to watch! It's where the makeup men, the prompters and the costume people have their being. They wouldn't change their lives for anything. No one knows better than they that all of life is an enormous theater where by no means everyone is cast in the role he was meant for. The play goes on, passions boil, the heroes brandish their swords, poets recite, Czars are crowned, castles on the stage tumble and spring up again in the twinkling of an eye, Yaroslavna² weeps for Igor on the fortress wall, the fairies and evil spirits fly, the ghost of the King appears, Hamlet broods—and the people are silent.³

My story will be a long one and these letters will be long. I shall get out of sequence and go back to the very beginning. God forbid that you should think of this as a novel, a biography or a memoir, or a consecutive story of any kind.

This is such a wonderful morning, a forest morning. Birds are singing and sunlight is filtering through the green half-darkness of the forest. I shall tell you today about the very end, the days in early March, 1953, when I was in my father's house watching as he lay dying. Was this really the end of one era and the beginning of another, as people are saying now? It's not for me to judge—we shall have to wait and see. My subject is not an era, but people.

They were terrible days. The feeling that the steady, firm and familiar ground was swaying beneath my feet began on

March 2, when I was called out of French class at the Academy and told that "Malenkov¹ wants you to come to Blizhny." (Blizhny, the Russian word for "near," was the name of my father's *dacha* at Kuntsevo, just outside Moscow, to distinguish it from his other houses, which were farther away.) It was unprecedented for anyone but my father to ask me to come to the *dacha*. I went with a strange feeling of disquiet.

When we were through the gates and Khrushchev² and Bulganin³ waved my car to a stop in the drive outside the house, I thought it must be all over. They took me by the arms as I got out. They were both in tears. "Let's go in," they said. "Beria⁴ and Malenkov will tell you everything."

Even in the front hall, nothing was the same as usual. Instead of the customary deep silence, everyone was bustling and running around. When someone finally told me that my father had had a stroke in the night and was unconscious, I even felt a little relieved. I had thought he was already dead. They'd found him at three in the morning, in the room I was standing in, right there, lying on a rug by the sofa. They decided to carry him to the next room, to the sofa he usually slept on. That's where he was now. The doctors were in there, too. "You can go in," somebody told me.

I listened in a haze. The details no longer had any meaning. I could take in only one thing: he was dying. I hadn't yet talked to the doctors, but I didn't doubt it for a second. It was plain that this whole house and everything around me were already dying under my very eyes. The whole three days I was there, I saw only this one thing. It was obvious there couldn't be any other outcome.

There was a great crowd of people jammed into the big room where my father was lying. Doctors I didn't know, who were seeing him for the first time—Academician V. N. Vinogradov,⁵ who'd looked after my father for many years, was

now in jail—were making a tremendous fuss, applying leeches to his neck and the back of his head, making cardiograms and taking X-rays of his lungs. A nurse kept giving him injections and a doctor jotted it all down in a notebook. Everything was being done as it should be.

Everyone was rushing around trying to save a life that could no longer be saved. A special session of the Academy of Medical Sciences was being held somewhere to decide what further steps should be taken. Another group of doctors was conferring in the next room. An artificial-respiration machine had been brought from one of the medical research institutes. Some young doctors had come with it, since no one else had the faintest idea how to work it. The unwieldy thing was just standing there idle, and the young doctors were staring distractedly around, utterly overcome by what was going on. Suddenly I realized that I knew that young woman doctor over there and wondered where I'd seen her before. We nodded but didn't say anything. Everyone was tiptoeing around as quiet as a mouse. They all felt that something portentous, something almost of majesty, was going on in this room and they conducted themselves accordingly.

There was only one person who was behaving in a way that was very nearly obscene. That was Beria. He was extremely agitated. His face, repulsive enough at the best of times, now was twisted by his passions—by ambition, cruelty, cunning and a lust for power and more power still. He was trying so hard at this moment of crisis to strike exactly the right balance, to be cunning, yet not too cunning. It was written all over him. He went up to the bed and spent a long time gazing into the dying man's face. From time to time my father opened his eyes but was apparently unconscious or in a state of semiconsciousness. Beria stared fixedly at those clouded eyes, anxious even now to convince my father that he was the most loyal and

devoted of them all, as he had always tried with every ounce of his strength to appear to be. Unfortunately, he had succeeded for too long.

During the final minutes, as the end was approaching, Beria suddenly caught sight of me and ordered: "Take Svetlana away!" Those who were standing nearby stared, but no one moved. Afterward he darted into the hallway ahead of anybody else. The silence of the room where everyone was gathered around the deathbed was shattered by the sound of his loud voice, the ring of triumph unconcealed, as he shouted, "Khrustalyov! My car!"

He was a magnificent modern specimen of the artful courtier, the embodiment of Oriental perfidy, flattery and hypocrisy who had succeeded in confounding even my father, a man whom it was ordinarily difficult to deceive. A good deal that this monster did is now a blot on my father's name, and in a good many things they were guilty together. But I haven't the slightest doubt that Beria used his cunning to trick my father into many other things and laughed up his sleeve about it afterwards. All the other leaders knew it.

Now all the ugliness inside him came into the open—he couldn't hold it back. I was by no means the only one to see it. But they were all terrified of him. They knew that the moment my father died no one in all of Russia would have greater power in his grasp.

My father was lying there unconscious. The stroke had been severe. He'd lost his speech, and his right side was paralyzed. He opened his eyes several times, but his gaze was clouded and no one knew whether he recognized anybody or not. Whenever he opened his eyes they leaned over him, straining to catch a word or even read a wish in his eyes. I was sitting at his side holding his hand and he looked at me, though I'm sure he couldn't see me. I kissed his face and his hand. There