

Summers in the country.

USSR 1965-1974

Avril Pyman

Born of a Methodist mother and Congregationalist father, I was christened Avril in the Church of England, in the Parish of Aislaby near Whitby, in the village of Dunsley where there was a convenient 'Mission Room' which doubled as a school. My parents, *post factum*, decided I should be called Deryn, but it was the nickname Dicky that stuck. In 1963, the year I married the Russian artist Kirill Sokolov, I was accepted into the Eastern Orthodox Church as Maria. In the country, in Russia, you just had to have a Christian name and a patronymic, so I became Maria Fedorovna after the popular Queen Mother of the last Tzar. My father, needless to say, was no more Theodor than hers had been, but Frederick. 'Fridrikovna', however, sounded more German than English (or - as in my illustrious predecessor's case – Danish) and, anyway, my father was known to friends and family by his second name, Cresswell (or Cressy) – which, as my mother-in-law wisely pointed out, sounded too like Croesus for anyone marrying into a Communist country. So 'Maria Fedorovna' I became to everyone in Russia who did not already know me as Dicky, though remaining Avril plus maiden-name on my books and Avril plus Sokolov on my passport: a messy arrangement which led Russian readers to take me for a man – an analogy with Avril Harriman – and caused confusion with my credit card because of the masculine ending that I had registered as the surname for my new English passport after my wedding. It had seemed to me then that Sokolova was more suited to a ballerina than an academic, though I needn't have worried as – when it came to it – my students at Durham University were perfectly happy with Doc. Sock! The poor little Welsh 'bird' (my mother was Gwenneth and there was an Aunt Myvfanwe, widowed and dug out of the rubble in the London blitz) had, by then, fallen by the wayside. Enough background ...

So there I was, the author of these reminiscences, turning 35 in 1965, two years married and pregnant, looking for a 'dacha'¹ where my husband and I could work on commission over the summer months, take a rest from our communal flat in Moscow and fill our lungs with fresh, country air. We had had a very pleasant arrangement in the

¹ Air quality and heat are oppressive in Moscow during the summer and everyone who can gets away – or at least evacuates their children. There are 'official' dachas for members of government, co-operative 'villages' with dachas for writers, artists, scientists, professors, party officials, for so-called Old Communists and high-ranking retired military. Many people had relatives (often grandparents) in the country; or ordinary, undistinguished mortals like us could take advantage of an unofficial system of sub-letting: in the country it was quite common for peasants to let out the more comfortable winter part of their houses and retreat to the 'seni' (the less hermetically sealable passageways, lofts and undercrofts of the 'izba').

outskirts of Zvenigorod during the first year of our marriage, but the authorities had refused to prolong the permit to reside anywhere other than at my registered address in Moscow – possibly because Zvenigorod was also the site of Brezhnev’s private dacha and it was common gossip there that he had been holding meetings, plotting to overthrow Khrushchev and effect a rapprochement with China ... All I was told, by a disembodied, somewhat aggrieved voice on the telephone, was “We can’t make out what you’re doing there.” ...

When we were forbidden Zvenigorod and after losing a cash deposit on other rooms in the semi-rural western suburbs of Moscow, also considered unsuitable by the Department of Visas and Registrations who decided such things, we spent some time and energy persuading them to give us an indication as to where we could go. Eventually, we were given the green light to see what we could find South East of the capital and within a 30-kilometer radius, found maps and looked for water. On the way out to the airport at Domodedovo the road crosses a river, the Pakhra, on the forested banks of which Lenin once had his dacha.

From the bridge, our eyes were drawn the other way down river to a picturesque village called Kolychevo on the bank of the meandering water. It was, as the name suggested, the historical patrimony of the good 16th century Metropolitan Philip, murdered by Maliuta Skuratov for his brave opposition to the authoritarianism of his childhood friend Ivan the Terrible. We asked the bus to stop and let us out, and set off on foot to see what we could find, knocking on doors.

“Nobody lets rooms here”, we were told by a helpful housewife. “But you could try over there ...” and she pointed down-river and away from the road to an abrupt bend and a line of forest with tiny wooden houses edging the wooded slope of the yonder bank.

“Oh,” I said. “Let’s go.” “Don’t be so stupid,” snapped Kirill, thoroughly out of temper. “There’s no road and you’re going to have a baby.” To one who had survived 1940-46 in an isolated Yorkshire hamlet and whose elder sister had had three babies there during war and petrol-rationing, this was no argument at all. So we set off across the river and along a dirt-track wide enough for farm vehicles to the distant village. An hour or so later we were knocking on the door of the first house we came to.

It was opened by one of the sweetest women I have ever met: Maria Ivanovna, the village post-woman, with soft, grey hair caught back from her face, slender as a young girl, lively, blue-grey eyes: “How can I help you?... Oh, rooms ... oh, I’m so sorry, I’ve family coming for the summer. Maybe opposite. Maria Georgievna.”

Maria Georgievna appeared at once, sturdy and hospitable, on her porch. There aren’t many new arrivals in a village with no proper road to it. She was sorry, but she could not help either. Maybe Maria Nikiforovna up the hill...?

So off we set to seek out Maria Nikiforovna, who turned out to be very short, stout and lame, hobbling on two sticks. She had three grown-up sons, but one was working at the airport, the middle one had left the village altogether and the younger was in prison, so she could easily clear the main part of the house for us: “Come in, come in and see if it suits you.”

We came in and it suited us. Kirill was deeply amused when our new ‘landlady’ shooed him away and led me out conspiratorially to the very top of the hill at the back of the house, where her state-of-the-art outside earth closet was fitted with startlingly brilliant electric light you could turn on from the main house – all set up by the son from the airport. I was solemnly invited to try it out and, as I emerged, Maria Nikiforovna herself rose beaming from a clump of leggy cabbages and exclaimed triumphantly: “you – there, Maria Fedorovna, and I down here!”

A few weeks later we took a taxi along the track across the fields, loaded with provisions and everything we needed for the summer. There was no shop, but a van called with bread and groceries once a week and Maria Nikiforovna kept hens so there was a plentiful supply of fresh eggs. One could buy berries and vegetables direct from the villagers and Maria Georgievna had two cows and kept us plentifully supplied with beautiful fresh milk. “Not even TESTED!” exclaimed a lady from the British embassy. Then, softening slightly, “Well, I suppose as long as you know the cow...” We did, only there were two of them, one white, one brown: ‘Mil’ka’ and ‘Zor’ka’. Maria Georgievna paid the cowherd and gave him a good, hot meal once every so often at her home to graze them along the riverbank and through the neighbouring glades and forest with the herd from the *Sovkhoz*.²

² Kupreyanikha was attached to a *Sovkhoz* (or candidate to become a *Sovkhoz* or *State Farm* as opposed to a *Kholkoz* or *Collective Farm*, the economic units which had replaced the assortment of landowner estates, peasant communes and successful yeomen farmers (later branded *Kulaks* or *Fists*). The peasants, a word still in everyday use in Soviet times without archaic pejorative flavour to designate those who actually worked the land, owned their own homes with small front gardens for flowers and back gardens for vegetables and fruit. Not all bothered with the flowers. Some kept bees, others a cow or two, goats, even in some cases, a small horse. The State or Collective Farm owned all agricultural machinery, herds of cattle, flocks of domestic fowls, expanses of arable land and grazing, and had administrative control of housing and community services such as water supply, electricity etc. The police were far away, as was medical help. I never saw a policeman in the villages. There was a ‘Feldsher’ (with qualifications between those of doctor and district nurse) in the neighbouring village of Lukino (the Sanitorium was not for locals). In case of fire, one beat the ‘nabat’ (an iron rail) to rally the villagers and form a chain of buckets. Though some things changed little, the law changed constantly. In the days of ‘War Communism’, immediately after World War One during the civil war, ‘expropriators’ from cities and industrial centres were sent in by the Soviets to commandeer produce, sometimes even seed grain, a policy which antagonised the peasants to the point of armed resistance. The New Economic Policy provided opportunities to grow comparatively rich, but weaker families went to the wall and began to form a ‘proletariat’ of landless labourers and insecure smallholders. In the ‘30s, the ‘collectivisation of agriculture’ began in earnest with the introduction of State and Collective Farms, the confiscation of livestock and ‘the elimination of the Kulaks as a class’. Consequent famine, then war, necessitated the re-introduction of a profit motive. It was still frowned on to employ hired labour, but a family could market their own produce, and regulations as to whether one might, with impunity, own one or two cows, were liable to change from one year to the next. Survival was a matter of second guessing the authorities, keeping in step with the ever-changing rules and keeping one’s head down. Small State farms such as the Kupreyanikha *Sovkhoz* had become something of a matriarchy. Few men had returned from the war and

The bull went with them and one kept out of their way as they mooed their way over the grassy street towards home, but Mil'ka and Zor'ka turned readily away from the rest to be fed and milked in their own stalls. The cowherd spent the entire day on horseback, his portable radio slung over his shoulder for company. There were moose in the forest, but the wolves, now the war had long ceased providing them with carrion, had betaken themselves further from the great cities. Maria Ivanovna's son, however, remembered with a shudder being followed by a lean grey shadow all the way home from the nearest bus-stop from school; telling himself, all along the river-bank, NOT TO RUN! The wolf never quite made up its mind to attack. Within 25 miles from Moscow, a degree of self-sufficiency was essential – even for a schoolboy.

We were very happy with Maria Nikiforovna. She told wonderful stories – not as a trained actor reads an audio-book but in a bardic sing-song, with sudden elliptic descents into the vernacular. All her generation had been schooled by the nuns at the nearest village. “Lukino was always a monastic village, Kupreyanikha a sorcerers’. Never had our own Church.” The nuns had taught them to read, write and sing. Maria Ivanovna later taught Irina, our daughter, her notes, and to my surprise I came upon them singing: “Do, re, me, fa, so ...!” – and not the ‘Sound of Music’ version ... Maria Nikiforovna told us how the convent, which was now a sanatorium, was disbanded in the early ‘30s. At the time, the local Party officials simply came and ordered the nuns out “and then those hooligans, the Komsomoltsy, were allowed to bring in rifles and make them run across the ploughed field. They didn’t hurt them, but it was so funny to see them running in their long skirts!” One nun ran to Kupreyanikha and married there, breaking her vows, for which she was struck blind:- ‘Blind Nastya’. But now she was a highly respected widow who knew all the prayers for the various necessities (‘treby’) of country life. The nearest priest served a number of villages and was seldom available, so everyone would turn to Nastya in bereavement, sickness or want for specific prayers for which they had forgotten the words. She knew all the intercessions and blessings by heart, which was a good thing for the villagers who now had to bury their dead in an unhallowed stand of trees on the way to Lukino. The women would get together and sing for the repose of their souls on the various days set aside for remembering the dead. Maria Ivanovna was, rather surprisingly, particularly important here, because she was “the only one who knew the bass”. It was important not only for spiritual reasons, but also to allay superstitious terrors. Neglected, the dead might grow hungry in their graves and waylay belated homecomers on the track from the main road ...

“As for those new landowners, the Communists,” Maria Nikiforovna concluded her history of the two villages, “they didn’t always know what they were about. Elijah’s Day, you

the ‘fatherless generation’, who would naturally have succeeded them, tended to gravitate to more popular centres with better-paid jobs and more freedom of movement. It made sense to leave grandmother (who had kept things going during the war with minimum male help) resident in the family home so that there was still a place to belong, to enjoy a free holiday and to replenish a feeling for their own roots. None of our three Marias’ children worked for the *Sovkhoz*.

know, was always a holiday, and they went and made the men harvest the corn. Well ... there was a thunderstorm that night and all the stooks were carried away.” “Maria Nikiforovna,” I said, deeply impressed by her sepulchral tone and total disrespect for the powers that be, “Who carried the stooks away?” She took my measure with quick little eyes and replied, rather grumpily, “Who carried off the stooks? Why, the wind, of course. Who did you think? Elijah the Prophet?”

We loved Nikoforovna and she was well-disposed to us because Kirill had taken to the younger son, now released from forced labour with disseminated sclerosis, and had done his best to get advice from the Medical Academy in Moscow, via his mother’s contacts. She taught English at the Academy and did indeed know a specialist on that wretched, progressive illness. There was no cure, he confirmed the prison doctor’s diagnosis, but one strange symptom he had noticed in the pursuit of one. The disease always seemed to afflict particularly likeable, sweet-natured people. His mother was delighted to learn this. Also, I trusted her, loved listening to her, and was always good for a laugh... unlike a previous lodger from the town who, she said, had done nothing but wash her linen every day and then ‘kept watch’ as it dried on the line in case her landlady helped herself to the odd pair of voluminous, pink knickers. “Stiraet i sterezhet! Tol’ko i delaet ... sterezhet i opiat’ stiraet!” (“Washing and watching! That’s all she ever did ... watching and washing!”)

I did as little washing as possible in those days. There was no running water and we had to bring it from a pump on the street and heat it in kettles on a paraffin stove, which also served for cooking. At the bend in the river at the bottom of the street was a wooden jetty from which one could either dive into the Pakhra for a refreshing swim or rinse one’s laundry in the clear flowing stream. It struck both Kirill and me that life ‘on the hill’ would be very arduous next summer. There would be nappies and baby clothes, so we decided we must move nearer the river and Maria Nikiforovna agreed. She had a word with our original two Marias, and it was Maria Georgievna who offered to accommodate us; Maria Ivanovna, with typical modesty, thinking her lovely little house not good enough for Kirill with his beautiful blue eyes, his paints, his easel and his foreign wife. Maria Georgievna, however, decided I would fit in because I was not afraid of her cows, as ladies from the town tended to be. Also, her izba was larger than most, her son Vaadik spent much time away and her hugely good-natured lorry-driver husband, Uncle Sanya, one of the few men of the village to have returned from the war, had no objection. Also, she loved babies. Once we were installed the following summer, Maria Nikiforovna would come down the hill almost every day for a chat with her friends, and to observe the progress of little Irochka. Maria Georgievna was a good neighbour. Maria Ivanovna was clearly unwell, not an ounce of spare flesh on her, and our new landlady invited her every day to drink a mug of milk warm from the cow. This was a proper invitation, not just an act of charity. Maria Georgievna would join her at table on the ‘terrace’ and Maria Nikiforovna hobble down the hill to sit

with them. Kirill sketched them, 'The Three Marias', a courteous little gathering with compositional overtones of Rublev's Trinity.³

At the end of that first summer, though, I left Maria Nikiforovna's for Moscow standing up in the back of a very bouncy lorry, watched with fascinated horror over every bounce by Kirill and his great friend Sasha Ershov, but managed to hang on to the baby and produce her on time back in England some three months later on 9th December. My mother had died the previous year. In a dream, she had been the first to tell me that I was expecting, which she discovered by gently touching my temples with a caressing movement I had particularly loved as a child. My father, who had Parkinsonism and probably the beginning of Alzheimer's (he was certainly very forgetful and kept himself in the know by writing everything down and constantly referring back to his diary), was the first to turn up at the nursing home while I was still puffing and panting from the birth. "They've just shown me your little girl! She looked at me as though she understood everything!" So beautiful ... He came to see us the following summer in Moscow accompanied by my cousin Eve, otherwise known as Sunshine (or Soapsud) Sue. There was a hold-up in the foyer of the hotel Ukraine because of some misunderstanding with bookings and considerable excitement among the milling new arrivals when a journalist mistook Daddy for the Duke of Wellington, due to clock in at the same time. It was Irochka's lusty wails rather than Cressy's silver hair, imposing height and general air of antiquated authority, however, which got him and cousin Eve priority in the bookings scramble and saw them (and us) to a decent suite – after much whispering and maternal cluckings between the ladies on reception. Eve was too relieved to escape the log-jam in the foyer to object to doubling up, although pleased to discover she was not actually expected to share a bed with her uncle!

The weather was dry so we were able to get a taxi to Kupreyanikha to show Daddy our beautiful summer retreat and he pleased all who met him by being just what they expected of an Englishman: unable to communicate, of course, but tall, spare, humorous, and as sporty as his years would allow. He died later that year and our little family - orphaned in a foreign land – was gifted with generous supplies of portable country fare from the gardens of our village friends. I was overcome, sniffing all the way back to Moscow, and Kirill too was touched and surprised to find us the object of such generous sympathy.

It was for our third summer that we finally settled in with our first friend, Maria Ivanovna. I was offering a modest wage to free myself up for work by keeping an eye on my now toddling daughter; Maria Ivanovna's health could no longer support the post-round in

³ Two of Kirill's formalised oil paintings of the Trinity and one original water-colour of the three Marias and Uncle Sanya at table are now installed behind the high table of St Chad's beautiful dining room at Durham University. The sketches were gifted to the Propp folklore section of St Petersburg University after an exhibition arranged at the Nabokov Museum *ensuant* on an illustrated talk at a conference in Durham on 'Death in Russian Culture'. The rough charcoal sketches reproduced here remain in the K K Sokolov Archive.

all weathers; and we had been vetted by Liza, Zina and Tolya, her robust, vivid grown-up children, whom she had raised alone (her husband died on active service), as she herself put it, “on carrots and fresh air”. All three were married: Zina, blonde, big and curly-haired, to Geisha, an ambulance driver at the Sanatorium at Lukino. The job provided them with a flat and all mod cons. Liza, big, dark and quieter than her rumbustious sister, lived in the industrial spread to the East of Moscow with her husband, Ivan, a police-dog trainer. Tolya, fair-haired like Zina, tall and remarkably good-looking, had a flat in Greater Moscow with his wife Rita, an engineer, and their silvery-blond little son, Serèzha. It was Maria Ivanovna’s fondest boast that Tolya, a trained technician, worked “in a white overall”, and it was to his hospitable flat that Kirill and I were invited to meet all three families. It was a wonderfully entertaining evening. A table laden with festive food and drink encouraged animated conversation, stories from real life which Kirill readily capped with hospital stories: “always go down well”, he would say, “and everybody has one or two of their own!” As the food dwindled, they sat back and began to sing. Tolya had a pleasant baritone and a great repertory, Zina a powerful Slavic soprano. The others joined in ... harmonising. We just listened, enchanted. “Grief is no ocean. All will ease, pass away ...” Old songs, new songs, heartfelt, funny ... On the way home, Kirill said wonderingly: “What a marvellous evening. That lot have twice the talent of the *Intelligentsia*”, which, from him was saying something ... his family and friends all seemed to be professional artists, musicians, architects, writers ... Still, my husband was a man of enthusiasms and he had made a discovery, or, perhaps, a rediscovery. Townspeople everywhere in the world have lost contact with traditional culture – and it is a loss indeed. Kirill’s occasional sketches were turning into a pictorial account of the life of a Moscow-district *Sovkhoz* – very different from the politico-promotional ‘socialist-realist’ dream ...⁴

Meanwhile, we had the good fortune to be adopted not only into the house of Maria Ivanovna but, to some extent, at least for her lifetime, into her family. Admittedly, she only bore with life in Moscow, with us for one winter: “I don’t know why it is, Maria Fedorovna, I love your Irochka and you and Kirill Konstantinovich are so good to me, sometimes better than my own family, and everything’s so clean and easy ... But I can’t bear it, I miss my home. I’ve just got to go back. I’ll see if I can’t find someone else to help you next winter ...” I regret to say that Irochka hid under the table from her unobjectionable successor, from which safe sanctuary she turned round and said in robust Kupreyanikha Russian: “Fuck your mother, I don’t WANT to go for a walk.” “That wasn’t a very nice thing to say,” I remonstrated (she and I spoke English). “But Auntie Zina says it,” she replied – adding shrewdly: “I suppose it’s all right for her because she’s grown-up, is it?” Auntie Zina we had witnessed in particularly fine form that summer. As Kirill, Ira and I strolled by the river, there was a sudden explosion of shrieks and shouts from up the hill, where a convivial gathering

⁴ The series has turned out to be a swan-song. Kupreyanikha has been all but swallowed by greater Moscow, the wooden houses almost all superseded by walled ‘dachas’; bolted gates bear the legend ‘Beware of the Dog’; the road has been hard-surfaced. Only a few village families remain, most looking for a way out. What has happened to the *Sov’khoz* I do not know.

was taking place; a young man tore past us towards the wooden jetty, his legs running away with him on the steep slope, Geisha and Tolya in hot pursuit. “Your watch!” shrieked Zina as Geisha pounded past. He took it off without breaking his strike and flung it at her. The youth rose to the surface and was striking out high in the water in a magnificent crawl towards the far bank, but, almost immediately, began to choke and sink. Within seconds Geisha and Tolya were hauling him back onto the bank and laying him out on the grass for the tender ministrations of Zina, who proceeded to pump the water out of him, showering him with a string of obscenities which Ira, secure in her father’s arms, was absorbing with all the riveted interest of a robin inspecting a whole trayful of tasty birdseed. We never disentangled the full story behind the incident. It looked more like a silly bet gone wrong than a suicide attempt, but the rescue was, nevertheless, impressive. Geisha was last seen sheepishly strapping on his wrist-watch and heading back up hill with Tolya to see if Maria Ivanovna had any spare day clothes for large men ...

Drink was usually at the bottom of such affrays, which featured high comedy rather than tragedy – except in the case of Nikiforovna’s younger son, who had, some years ago, taken a pot shot at his successful rival on his wedding day, but blinded in one eye, by mistake, the bride he had wanted for himself, and been sentenced to forced labour ... the entire village insisting loyally that he was normally the gentlest and most obliging character on the hill ...

Another occasion featuring Zina was a fight in the woods with the men of a neighbouring village – something in the nature of a ritual clash between rival football fans. It had started as a friendly picnic, which was why we were there. Zina decided to break up a sudden tussle among the men, slipping off her sandals and moving into the thick of the fray, swearing like a trooper and slapping painfully left-right with the soles. Her brother kept her back, walking hard up behind her, serviceable fists seconding the flapping sandals from around her body ... I headed for home before Ira could pick up any more choice expressions; Kirill helped calm the situation with a diversion involving the heave-ho of some kind of hand-cart into the river ... and they all went home again ...

Dostoyevsky tells a wonderful tale of how once, as a little boy on holiday, he had run from a wolf into the safe embrace of a friendly peasant: the huge reassurance of the man’s strength and good will ... the relief that he knew what to do and understood the danger. I experienced two similar moments:

The first involved a somewhat quixotic attempt on our part to join in some winter celebration in Kupreyanikha. For some reason, Kirill made the journey either before or after Ira and me. She, I think, must have been about three, and I decided to pull her and the usual bundle of provisions on her little sleigh (the Moscow winter substitute for a pushchair and much more serviceable on the snow-covered dirt-track from Lukino to Kupreyanikha). There was a well-tended asphalt road from the bus-stop on the chausée to the sanatorium but, after Lukino, an unfenced track coasted gently down through the unfenced fields. I had

reckoned without the snow. Everything looked different and, at an unrecognised fork in the track, I chose the clearly more used, downhill branch, only to arrive some 20 minutes later at a steaming manure heap – and a dead end. By the time we were back at the fork we had lost more than an hour, the short, winter day was closing in, and it was beginning to snow. I hurried past the grave-wood, conscious of my delicious child perched among fragrant salamis and hunks of cheese, pluckily singing along behind me – unfortunately, I cannot keep a tune, but still sang lustily to cheer us along: “Glor-oria, glor-oria, glor-or-or-oria, In excelsis Deo!” and other such seasonal processionalists. Still, I could not quite drown out the memory of Tolya’s shadowy, grey wolf. My short-sighted eyes were half-blinded with snow and the dark was falling fast. Moreover, the snow seemed to be getting deeper and softer at every step and it was really very cold. I had begun to worry we might have missed the track again when, suddenly, there was music, lights, a chorus of friendly voices from behind. Uncle Sanya, crimson-cheeked from the frost, driving a sleigh with a shaggy little horse from the Sovkhoz; anxious voices; helping hands. “Maria Fedorovna, what are you doing out here in the dark?” “Give as that child!” “That’s right, Irochka. Hoopla!” “Tie that little sleigh to ours. There we go, you hop in too.” “We’re almost home!” And we were ...

The next occasion was also about weather. A summer story. There was a sandy stretch of shore with shallow water up-river from the Kupreyanikha bend. It was very hot, and I had taken Irochka and Serezha, dressed in nothing but sun-pants, for a paddle. I wore a bathing dress under a sundress and we had one towel between us. There were several other people lounging in the sand. It really was too hot to work! A black cloud advanced on us against the wind and the others began to drift away – but I took no notice, lazily absorbed in the children’s game. They were industriously baking a feast of sand-pies, addressing one another as ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ like an elderly couple from another age of the world. Then came a loud clap of thunder, right over our heads. I gathered up our scant belongings and the hail hit us as we reached the path: - huge pebbles of ice. The children were squealing pathetically and I laid them down, spread the inadequate towel over as much as it would cover and lay on top of them. It seemed to be easing off, so we got up and hurried for home, me carrying Serezha who was, understandably, crying for his mum; Ira, as usual, staunchly co-operative but silent, all three of us by now thoroughly scared. Just as the hail intensified again a large, familiar figure came swinging towards us from the village, carrying extra blankets – Zina’s husband, Geisha. He wrapped the children like sausage rolls, threw a third blanket over my bare shoulders and, tucking a child beneath each arm, headed for home, chortling soothingly. We fought our way back to the house, where the shivering youngsters endured a vigorous rubdown with neat vodka – and Geisha and I were awarded a generous slug apiece of the same panacea.

So, after the happy winter (for us) in Moscow with Maria Ivanovna, who made us more friends than we ever deserved in our new Union of Journalists Co-operative ground-floor flat, we continued to spend the summers in her house. She taught Irochka to be generous and open-handed with her sweets and toys, to recite a whole litany of lively

Russian *chastushki* (improvised, calypso-type jingles) and, when greeted with one of those meaningless grown-up ‘how are you?’s, not to lower her eyes and mumble, but to look up with a smile and reply smartly with the equivalent of “I’m FINE, thank you. And how are you?” A model of courtesy herself, she also taught us to be polite to people tapping on the kitchen window (which was beside the locked entrance) asking for plastic bags (not available over the counter at that time), or even small loans to buy some (usually edible) rarity, unexpectedly on display in the shops, or to be let in to visit their friends on the ninth floor up! She had the great politeness to remind me to *offer* her butter at the breakfast table: “No, Maria Fedorovna, I would NEVER help myself!”

Unforgettably, she DID help herself to a book of folk tales by a supposedly difficult surrealist emigré writer, a great connoisseur of the spoken Russian idiom, Aleksei Remizov. He was considered a difficult author, for specialists only, but had his admirers in the Soviet Union and some followers among Soviet writers (Pilnyak, Platonov and others). I had already lost one or two rare Parisian and pre-Revolutionary Russian editions of his works to absent-minded Moscow bibliophiles and, looking worriedly up and down our bookshelves, asked Maria Ivanovna, quite unsuspectingly, whether she had seen this particular book. “Oh, Maria Fedorovna,” she replied uncomfortably, “I took it – it’s at Kupreyanikha – to read to the women on the stove.⁵ What do you learned people want with folk tales? – We love them and you can’t get ones like that nowadays. Real good ones!”

The Tales were, eventually, returned – though with a reluctance that would have delighted their ‘difficult’ author, who I had known when studying in Paris and, alas, never got to tell about it. He had died in 1957, complaining bitterly to the last that reviewers seemed to think he chose to write in Russian-as-it-is-spoken-in-and-around Moscow “just in order to make my books harder to understand” ...

I think it must have been the winter of 1970 or 1971 that Maria Ivanovna died. It was not our season for country living, but Kirill and I, of course, went to the funeral. It had been to save up for this eventuality that Maria Ivanovna had agreed to stay the winter with us and to care for Ira in the summer months: to avert expense for her children and avoid any possible bad feeling over who should pay for what after she died ...

They did her proud. By the time we arrived the winter part of the house, which had been given over to our use in the summer, had been completely cleared of furniture except for a bed with the open coffin on it placed diagonally in a corner by the window. All the

⁵ The Russian stove is a tiled quadrilateral reaching from floor to ceiling which, in winter, acts as oven and central heating for the izba. It has a heated space, used as a bed for the sick or play-space for the children, above the log-fuelled oven part. It was Ira’s delight to be helped ‘onto the stove’ to dry when we washed her hair. Maria Ivanovna would creep up with her and read her a story, snuggled down on ‘Liuska’, a goatskin from a beloved defunct pet of Tolya, Liza and Zina. I remember one of those “who loves who best in the world?” conversations and Irochka’s beaming, little face looking down at us: “I love MYSELF. Look at me, all warm and curly.”

village was there and, of course, her children. Zina stood by their mother's bedside and talked to her loud and clear: not an intimate murmuring but an improvised performance for all the room to hear:

“Look, mother, look, how many people have come to see you off. There's Tolya and Liza with Ivan and here's Kirill Konstantinovich with Maria Fedorovna come all the way from Moscow ...”.

So it went on, a long, loving commentary, until there was a sudden stir and her menfolk came forward to carry out the coffin. We all followed and it was laid down, briefly, before each of the two houses in which she had lived, before being put into the hearse (a large designed-for-purpose van with RITUAL written on the side) and taken to the church in Kolychevo, followed by a bus with the mourners. Kirill and I were honoured to be transported together with the family and the body. Zina went on talking to her all the way:-

You wanted to make your confession, but we said: “Whatever have you got to confess, Mother? You've got no sins.” But she said “Oh yes I have. When Tolya was born I never took a prayer⁶ for him and now he's losing his way ... it's my fault.” So I told her: “There's no-one as good as you, Mother. Do you remember how you taught us you must always give to the first three beggars you meet on your way to church? If you have no money, give bread; no bread – give a potato or whatever there is to eat. But, if you've really got nothing – don't hurry past but look them in the eye and just say: “Sorry, love, but I've nothing myself.” ...

And so she went on till the van came to a halt and the men rallied round again to bear the coffin into the church where it was laid on a plinth and Liza and Zina together began the lament:

This was traditional ritual and painful to listen to, the sisters working each other up into hysteria with howls and yelps and cries of “Mother, Mother, why have you left us? Why? Why?”

Then, as if from nowhere, the choir struck up, the same women who had regularly visited the graves with Maria Ivanovna intoning ‘the bass’. “Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy and Immortal, have mercy upon us...”. The voices seemed to absorb and raise up the raw emotion of the lament and the coffin was carried again in solemn procession round the church and, followed by the mourners, to the waiting vehicles. We went with the family to the woodland graveyard, where the coffin was put down for the last time on wooden struts.

⁶ Although Orthodox I am not sure whether this refers to some special prayer the priest speaks over a new mother and child or the ceremony of ‘Churcing’ the woman after the birth or even of baptising the baby, though my instinct is that one way or another she would have managed this last – even in the isolation of the country in wartime.

Ivan looked with quiet eyes at the small, delicate face: “Nu⁷ Maria Ivanovna,” and covered it for the last time. The lid was gently placed over it and he hammered in the first nail. The coffin was lowered into the ready-dug grave, earth quietly scattered.

We had to leave immediately after the cemetery to get back to Moscow but, most surely, Maria Ivanovna’s fellow- villagers returned to her home and, as she would have wished, to a slap-up wake.

⁷ ‘Nu’ is an everyday expression meaning anything from ‘Now’ to ‘Time’s up’ to ‘Well, now’. In context, the homely monosyllable had a strangely solemn, yet affectionate, finality ...