

PUSHY WOMEN

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Herman H. Lackner

Pushy Women

At the mention of pushy women, Boadicea naturally springs to mind -- thought I'd say Hilary, didn't you? -- a woman of forceful and inflexible character but not, I'm sorry to say, the subject of this essay. Nor is St. Helen who found the true cross (the fragments of which provided so bountifully for the construction of medieval shrines) and then saw to the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Empire. Nor do I propose to regale you with the antics of those destroyers of chivalry who don't even allow me to remove my hat when a lady enters the elevator.

Instead, we'll examine the lives of three ladies from St. Petersburg who had nothing in common except their zeal to accomplish miracles on their own in the great tradition of such women as Mmes. Curie, Sojourner Truth, or Augusta Schuenemann who braved the Great Lakes winter storms to bring her annual cargo of joy and hope in the form of Christmas trees to the quay at the Clark St. Bridge. Not for them the martyr's crown of Joan of Arc, the wealth of televangelist Tammy Fay Bakker, the iron will of Mrs. Thatcher or the titles and perks of Princess Di, but rather an unrecognized though enterprising and determined push for the enhancement of life around them.

Margarita Georgnove Arroneta was born in St. Petersburg in 1899. Her father, descended from a family of French huguenots who had emigrated from France to Russia by way of Geneva at the time of Peter the Great's espousal of French culture, was Chief Councillor of the Tsar's collection in the Hermitage. This resulted in interesting and stimulating contacts as well as a sound education for his children. While one sister studied architecture at the Polytechnic and the other was enrolled in the Smolny, Margaret attended the Lutheran School of St. Ann where her teacher was the wife of an official in the American Embassy and an ardent member of the Y.W.C.A. Being urged by her teachers to apply to an engineering school abroad, she was promptly accepted by both M.I.T. and Cornell.

1917 was, as we know, a turbulent and troublesome time in Russia and in the middle of it all her grandfather died. When his estate was settled each heir was handed a bag full of gold rubles. Margaret's share, probably supplemented by a bit of moonlighting, was sufficient to get her through college. So off she went to Norway for a Nansen passport and on to Cornell University. There, after four years of technical studies in an unfamiliar language, she became the second woman in its history to be awarded a degree in Civil Engineering. This enabled her to return to her homeland with Herbert Hoover's Relief Commission to pursue her dream of bringing its infrastructure into the twentieth century. What should have been a triumphant homecoming turned out to be a bitter disappointment. Lenin & Co. had not made progress user-friendly. Frustrated, she managed to come back to America to begin a new life.

Wasting no time in licking her wounds, she embarked on a career that finally brought her to Chicago, first with American Bridge and then translating foreign technical journals for the Portland Cement Association. At one of Mrs. William Vaughan Moody's gatherings for poets and other creative but potentially lonely and impecunious types she met Franklin Corbin, a young bachelor, no doubt cruising the most opulent buffet tables of the city. There followed a marriage of sixty-six years, three children, eight grandchildren and an ever-increasing force of great-grands.

"Family Values", whether advocated by Republicans, Democrats, or Ross Perot, meant a great deal to her as defined by her own high standards. Throughout her ninety-six years she pushed the well-being of her family, which meant education and exposure to every available facet of culture and nature, to enable them to take an intelligent part in the world's affairs. When one of her grand-daughters moved, with husband and baby, to the wilder reaches of Vermont, Margaret paid for a six-mile power line extension so that no great-grandson of hers would be beyond the reach of civilization or cyberspace. She not only had the wisdom to set ambitious goals for herself and her family but the imagination to see them through. Strength of character enabled her to judge her achievements by her own high standards and modesty prevented her from admitting them.

The prize fund established in her honor at Cornell enables a student to continue graduate education leading to a Master's Degree in Engineering. So far it has been won by four women and a man. What a pushy way to enhance the future!

Another pushy woman from St. Petersburg was Dagmar Ruin, born in 1897 with a silver spoon in her mouth. Her mother was a lady-in-waiting to the Dowager Empress while her father had charge, for the Tsar, of all the railroads in Russia. Even with both parents working, life was idyllic in a commodious town house all winter, an ample house on the Tsarkoye Selo palace grounds for spring and fall, and then complete bucolic relaxation for the summer on the family's estate in Finland. School for Dagmar and her seven siblings was followed by music, dancing, and French lessons, sports and riding in the park with young pages from their school on the palace grounds (always discreetly followed by a groom) and, of course, religious instruction -- both Orthodox and Lutheran. Often life was embellished by accompanying her father on his railroad inspection trips of which privation was not a salient feature. The opulent private car was too full of parents, tutors, governesses and servants to allow for more than daily school work plus an overview of the region through which they were passing. If it happened that Daddy was, for the moment, out of favor with his boss, the Tsar, then, naturally, there were more time-consuming inspections to be made in Siberia, accompanied, of course, by all of the above.

In the summer of 1914 the family entrained for Switzerland where they had rented a villa near Lucerne, only to be suddenly and urgently called back in August. Soon the reports of suffering and heroism, of dreams of victory and the reality of defeat were too much for the impetuous Dagmar. Without telling her family, she volunteered to be a Red Cross nurse in a field hospital. Tears and family hysterics soon subsided, however, and were replaced by fitted cases of monogrammed silver and crystal jars, toiletries, hand-

made boots, tailor-made uniforms and crested picture frames. Finally she and her family were driven to the Imperial Waiting Room of the station where footmen glided over red carpets passing fruits and ices, no doubt glad that they weren't boarding the waiting troop train headed for the front!

On-the-job training started in earnest when they established a field hospital in an old monastery in Vilna, and reached a crescendo of horror with the disintegration of the Russian army three years later.

Now "Fast Forward" through her memoirs to the transition (without pause) from World War to Russian Revolution to Finland's War of Independence and escape from Red to White controlled areas.

Captured and interrogated by a Red Unit and lewdly propositioned by its leader, her reply was quote "a resounding box on the-ear. I realized that it was an impolitic action but couldn't help it. His face became distorted with rage and he roared the order: 'Shoot her.' I was dragged into the yard, placed with my back to a wood pile, hands tied, blind-fold declined with a shove and the make-shift firing squad took aim. Suddenly a loud explosion was heard nearby causing a considerable uproar and momentarily diverting the attention of the executioners. I slipped behind the wood pile, rolled in the snow, picked myself up, stumbled, with bullets whistling around me and ran through the darkness."

She then joined the army which General Mannerheim was assembling in the northern forests to expel the Russians from Finland. As a nurse, she became the only woman in the Green Battalion whose mission was to harass and drive back the Russians

and local Communists along the rugged southern coast, stretching from St. Petersburg to Helsingfors. When, however, the tables were turned and the Russians were doing the harassing --one of their major skills-- Sister Dagmar and her rag-tag Green Battalion found themselves driven out to the string of rocky little islands which rim that coast with no hope of breaking through to friends or comrades on the mainland. As it happened the winter of 1917-18 was the coldest on record in that normally rather brisk part of the world and, miraculously, the Gulf of Finland froze over! Solid! In the dead of night Sister Dagmar loaded her wounded onto sledges to be pulled by her few remaining horses. "Her boys" were assembled (the Colonel was only twenty-one years old) from their hiding places and set forth in a snow storm which mercifully covered their tracks. Four freezing days later they arrived in Estonia to be greeted by Prince Henry of Prussia and the German Army which had so recently been their adversary on the plains of Byelo-Russia and Poland. The idea of a woman in the army being incomprehensible to the Prussian, Prince Henry could not have new warm clothing issued to her but, as a presumed camp-follower he could, and did, send her on a secret and dangerous mission behind enemy lines.

Presently independence became a reality in Finland and their own regular army had to be created to insure its permanence. With a force to be reckoned with such as Sister Dagmar at large, need I say that the antecedent of our WACS and WAVES which was called the Lotta Svarde was among the first units activated. Then came the Esthonian War of Independence to which, out of gratitude, Finland contributed a Field Hospital with

Sister Dagmar as head nurse. After that shiploads of orphans from war-ravaged eastern Europe were brought to Finland for R & R.

Ultimately even wars come to an end -- to give time to catalogue the injustices, real or fancied, which will lead to the next one. So in the respite of eighteen years before she had to turn her house into a field hospital for the "Winter War" of 1939, Sister Dagmar found time to indulge her hobby. To quote again from her memoirs:

"The one kind of work which gives me recreation is my hobby. It is the work for the war cripples and orphans. How could I leave my friends from the days of mutual struggle and hardship? But it is not much I am able to do. For to give real help, not only beautiful words and pity and honor and so on, requires money. And my pockets are empty. Since my family lost everything in the Revolution we learned to know what poverty is."

Where does money come from? America. So several miracles and a transatlantic crossing later she arrived in New York penniless and friendless but full of hope and worldly ignorance. In less than a year she returned to Finland to realize her dream of a home for war cripples and orphans. To fund it she had pushed herself, to the limit in soliciting contributions from new American friends (~~the same ones who a few years later, helped her turn her house into a field hospital~~) but she made it! Henry Ford even capped it all by adding a bright red ^{Model T} touring car to his gift. Pushy, of course, but she never lost her dexterity with scrub brush or bed-pan.

Christmas Day of 1805 saw the birth of yet another pushy woman from St. Petersburg. As her father was returning from Austerlitz, Maria Raëvsky was born at Baltyshka, one of the family's estates in the Ukraine. Her forebears numbered more notables than there are eggs in caviar, including the scientist and librarian Lomonosov, the wealthy literary lion Prince Davidov, Catherine the Great's Field Marshall Potemkin and, of course, her father Prince Nikolai Raëvsky, a national military hero in the Napoleonic wars.

Like most generals in the age of Napoleon, General Raëvsky was a busy man. In addition to commanding an army corps whose area covered all of southern Russia and its purposefully fluctuating Asiatic borders, he took care of his mother's complicated affairs, including several estates and their thousands of serfs; he accompanied the Tsar on diplomatic missions and saw to the well-being and education of his own large family. All these responsibilities notwithstanding, when arthritis gave him serious trouble he undertook a two-month trip to remote springs in the Caucasus to "take the waters." The retinue required for such a safari included three children, their governess and two tutors, assorted domestics, a doctor, a detachment of guards, and the poet Pushkin (whose outspoken poetry had made it expedient for him to explore the regions of Russia most remote from its capitol).

The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, which spread from England to France to Germany and Russia was an intellectually exciting time when French was the lingua franca of the nobility -- conveniently not understood by the servants -- while English was the preferred language of literature. Liberalism, within the limits of retaining and

improving existing institutions rather than replacing them, was espoused -- and even encouraged by the brilliant young Tsar as he corresponded with Thomas Jefferson. The Tsar's liberalism probably reached its apogee at Tilsit during his meeting with Napoleon when he gave away everyone else's land while -- in the best tradition of diplomacy -- grabbing Finland for himself. During these summit meetings General Raëvsky whiled away the time in taking long walks with one of the more progressive of the up and coming young A.D.C.s, Prince Sergei Volkonsky.

Descent from Rurik, the 9th Century founder of the Russian state, had endowed the Volkonskys not only with more than ample cash reserves but with a very real sense of duty to their country and government as well as a feeling of responsibility for its people, whether free or serfs. This was fostered in Sergei by his tutors and by a progressive school run by French emigrés under a young and liberal Tsar. Even his subsequent experience in the Corps des Pages and then in the cavalry nurtured an open mind. Therefore, when he talked with General Raëvsky at Tilsit and also met French officers who had served with Lafayette in America, he began to think seriously of how he could help to bring Russia into the developed modern world of Europe, both physically and intellectually (a tradition of intentions started by Peter the Great and continuing to this day). His father, on the other hand, considered that "he thinks too much and reads too much in English and in French" instead of partying like other young blades -- "Such idealism might even cost him a brilliant career at court." Napoleon's invasion of Russia saw him, at twenty-four, a Major General, then came the Congress of Vienna with exposure to all the brilliant minds which that attracted, and finally a grand tour of Europe

(with two valets and a driver) which he had hoped to cap with a trip to America but Napoleon's return from Elba dashed that dream. Instead, he was given a senior command in the Ukraine and there our story really begins -- after a short digression.

Russia had neither tradition nor skill in revolution. Terrorism, conspiracy, intrigue, insurrection, rebellion were all household words, as common and almost as senseless as gang warfare in Chicago or bombings in the Fertile Crescent. Coordinated purpose -- political, moral or economic -- was as non-existent as freedom of religious belief which normally evolves into freedom of political judgement. They had no guidelines, no catalogue of past failures, no well thought-through program and certainly no attempt to enlist the sympathy or support of any large segment of the population. Should they reform the army? From general to private it never occurred to them to waiver in their loyalty to the Tsar. Free the serfs and give them land? Who would take care of the poor, improvident fellows from cradle to grave? Besides, neither Britain nor America had yet given serious consideration to so drastic a move. Educate the masses? So that they could read all that subversive literature. Gradually change from autocracy to constitutional monarchy to republic as Jefferson had suggested? Not even the most radical would consider that. Whereas in Europe the discontented masses were lacking leaders, in Russia the discontented leaders were lacking masses. Instead of preparation or propaganda to arouse general concern, secret societies proliferated to promote discussion among the well-educated. Pushkin, thought to be too garrulous for security, said of such meetings: "Twas all mere idle chatter/Twixt Chateau Lafitte and Veuve Cliquot."

So it was almost to be expected that Prince Sergei Volkonsky, bored with the army in spite of his command, disappointed in missing a trip to America, tired, at thirty-five, of the demands made by society on the life of Kiev's most eligible bachelor, would seek more stimulating company. When his good friend and future brother-in-law, Prince Orlov, ~~also a mason~~ ^a and fellow-member of the Kiev Literary Club, introduced him to the "Society of Russian Knights" which shortly became "The Union of Welfare", he joined with enthusiasm. Here he could converse freely on a broad range of topics with fellow intellectuals whose exposure to new ideas while fighting Napoleon echoed his own desires to free the serfs and reform the government. All members being of the nobility, it never occurred to them to consult or involve the great mass of Russians on whom the success of their schemes depended. All was to be handed down to a grateful folk without disturbing the status quo. The Tsar and his top-level ministers were presumed liberals, all discussions were in French and those nosy police spoke only Russian so discretion seemed not to be a serious problem.

However, it had not been anticipated that, at the Congress of Vienna and in the following Holy Alliance, Metternich would convert the newly-broadminded Tsar and his ministers from liberalism to rigid reaction. This caused the northern branch of the conspiracy to call for the assassination of the Tsar, and hence more violence, so Prince Orloff resigned and soon thereafter married a daughter of General Raëvsky. Presently he introduced Volkonsky to his sister-in-law Maria and when Sergei proposed to her it really hit the fan. The General was bitterly opposed to having a son-in-law who was a member of a secret society but was sufficiently intrigued by the wealth and status of the

Volkonskys to give his consent. In January, 1825 they were married. She, at nineteen, swept off her feet by a "personality" she hardly knew, he, at thirty-five, truly in love but still able to keep a secret. The following November the Tsar suddenly died of a heart attack and, after two weeks of confusion over the succession, during which each of his brothers swore allegiance to the other, Nicholas was sworn in. This appeared to be the logical day for an insurrection but no plans or program had been finalized so, instead, it became a demonstration -- a demonstration that would go down in history as the "Decembrist Revolt". It was also the day on which Sergei and Maria's first child was born. Two weeks later (mail was no faster then than now) Sergei Volkonsky was arrested, jailed, ultimately tried, found guilty, and sentenced to exile in Siberia for life, the first fifteen years at hard labor, a sentence executed by his classmate at the Corps des Pages, now chief of police.

Maria's reaction was immediate, positive and firmly opposed by her family as well as by the Tsar. In appealing to the Tsar for permission to follow the exiles to Irkutsk she wrote "my new-born son is happy and well cared-for. My husband is unhappy and needs me more." Finally permission was granted and, wrapped in sables, she sped across an almost roadless Russia and Siberia in a troika open sleigh with a piano strapped on the back, in the dead of winter, covering 175 of the 4,000 miles on a good 24-hour day. After twenty-three days and nights she arrived at Irkutsk, the capitol of Eastern Siberia where the Governor was waiting to tell her to turn right around and go home without even seeing her husband. Alternatively, she was asked to sign a document renouncing her name and titles, wealth, the possibility of ever returning to Russia or seeing her infant

son again. This she did with a flourish and went off to follow her friend Princess Katyusha Troubetskoy in the last lap of the trip to Ner^cshinsk where Sergei was working in the silver mines. Once settled in a room shared with her friend she was allowed to see her husband -- in chains, in prison.

Nerchinsk was the nadir. Six hours of mining per day for men who had never had a pick or a shovel in their hand before, followed by putrid food and the remainder of the day and night spent sitting on their wooden bunks, eight to a hut in semi-darkness. Filthy rags were their only clothes and the clank of their chains their only music. As Kennan pointed out to a later Tsar: intellectual deprivation is the severest punishment. So some of Russia's clearest thinkers spent half their waking hours in idleness without books or paper and pencil, their only resource being to teach each other foreign languages (including Russian which theretofore had only been spoken to servants but must now be understood coming from guards and jailers).

The little band of wives who had followed their exiled husbands were allowed two visits of two hours per week, closely supervised to assure that no pregnancy resulted. In addition to sewing shirts for the men, using fish bones for needles, they became resourceful in extracting minor concessions from the jailers ~~and their bosses~~ and bribing guards to take to the men the few extras which they were able to cook. Religious services they couldn't achieve, but they were able to learn local languages enough to get practical if not spiritual help from the shamans of the local animist religion.

After a year all the exiled Decembrists were gathered from different parts of Siberia and confined in one jail of four large rooms with light, air, and gardens. Here

in Chita (still a feature of Stalin's Gulags) the women rented rooms in the houses of the local cossacks. For the next seven years adjustment, if not resignation, to exile under the harshest of terms developed with the help and leadership of these women, inspired and led by the Princesses Troubetskoye and Wolkonski. Most important was the cooperative in which all income, whether subsistence allowance, a pittance earned from their little vegetable plots, or substantial stipends illegally forwarded by wealthy relatives, was pooled. This included books, writing materials, food packets, even clothes. Thirty-two of the prisoners had neither money nor helping family but they became equal partners in the benefits of the cooperative. In the same way classes were organized and taught. (How different from the modern "Correctional Facility" where criminal techniques comprise the curriculum!) There being no children, a P.T.A. was unnecessary so "Continuing Education" was the watchword. Lectures and classes were given as skills and talents were discovered and as time was available after prison duties. The courses included chemistry, physics, astronomy, history, and literature. Instruction leaned more heavily on lectures because of the scarcity of teaching materials and facilities for lab work.

With a new and humane commander and, one suspects, new guards more amenable to bribery, the quality of life improved greatly in Chita. Those women who could afford it had houses built near the prison and were even allowed to have servants. Twice a week their husbands came to them under guard for their two hour supervised visit. Meanwhile a carpenter shop and tailor and cobbler shops were built. A large kitchen garden planted with vegetables new to Siberia, and the operation of the kitchen taken over

by the cooperative resulted in significant culinary improvements -- especially after the arrival of the French wife of one of the prisoners. Books and magazines were ordered to build up a library. A string quartet was formed and Maria's piano formed the nucleus of an orchestra and/or the accompaniment for singers. Local officials, merchants, school children, all came to "the Academy" to take part --to learn or just to listen as well as to teach the local languages. After two years the leg-irons were removed and the wives had them made into bracelets. Even the rules on celibacy were relaxed and the ladies lost no time in cooperating.

After three years in Chita they were moved to Petrovsky where the men had larger individual cells and wives could live in. In the tenth year of their exile they were at liberty to have their own homes wherever they wished in the neighborhood of Irkutsk, and in the twenty-eighth they were allowed to return to Russia -- which many of the survivors did.

The blessings accruing to Eastern Siberia through the twenty-eight year exile of Princess Maria Wolkonski are too numerous and too subtle to catalogue;

The courage to leave a new-born son who had everything, to care for a much older husband who suddenly had nothing -- not even hope (This later proved to Stalin that it could be done so he sentenced Anna Larina Bukharin, wife of the well-known scientist to twenty years in a Siberian Gulag, leaving her one-year old son behind); the perseverance to cope with the sudden change from a life of unbelievable luxury to one of equally unbelievable privation; the wit to adapt a classical education to the needs and capabilities of her largely illiterate pastoral neighbors; even her cleverness in dealing with

authority -- all these endeared her to all who had come to this new land, both willingly and unwillingly.

More tangible fruits of her untiring activity were to persuade the criminals in the neighboring prison to form a chorus and train some of their more ebullient voices as well as to encourage choral singing in the local schools in which she also fostered the study of art, drama, and professional skills that would increase employment opportunities.

After the Decembrists were released from prison and could live in Irkutsk or its environs, Maria purchased a large and handsome house with room for entertaining and for numerous servants which permitted her to take a still more active part in the local scene and probably to badger the Commandant more effectively on behalf of the remaining prisoners. Above all it made the local schools available to the son and daughter born to her in Siberia. Schools may have been a problem but education certainly was not. The best brains of Russia were in that prison anxious for the stimulus of teaching each other, their children and, while they were at it, the local children. Young Mikhail Volkonsky, Maria's son born in Siberia, when he was finally allowed to come to St. Petersburg was found to speak better French than most of the court. The Foundling Hospital which she had helped to establish and support grew into a cradle-to-grave concern for everyone's health, supervised by the former Surgeon General of the Army, now an exile, and even spawned a fore-runner of our Visiting Nurse Association.

To further the cultural blossoming of eastern Siberia, Maria raised money to have a theatre/concert hall built which not only attracted artists and orchestras from afar but

nurtured the habit of fund solicitation in support of civic projects -- a habit with which we have become so familiar a century and a half later.

The economic development of Siberia became, of course, a major concern to the men and women sentenced to spend their lives there -- especially as they were released from prison but not allowed to go home to Russia. Maria's grandfather, the scientist Lomonosov, had published his "Fundamentals of Metallurgy" in 1763 and gold had been found in the sand of most of the river valleys of Siberia. However, forced labor in the silver mines of Chita had probably dulled the ardor to pursue more precious metals. Additionally, the inaccessibility of these remote sites, the harshness of the climate, and the severity of the police combined to limit enthusiasm for a gold rush such as the later implosion in California. The importation from Russia ^{by the exiles and others} of new seeds and cuttings to develop local produce seemed to give promise of greater benefit to both the exiles and the locals.

Not only had the stag-line at St. Petersburg balls been decimated by the events of 1825, but even the Kiev Literary Club lost many of its keenest minds. For a generation a whole country became afraid to think after the ultra-reactionary Tsar Nicholas I ^{so ruthlessly} suppressed the Decembrist Conspiracy ~~with such unreasonable~~ severity. As a failed revolution or as an inept demonstration by young intellectuals it would soon have been forgotten were it not for the eleven women who created its legend by following the exiles to Siberia. None of them had even heard of the secret societies until the arrest of their husbands. None had political or social ambitions or wanted to ^{through the Decembrist movement} carve out careers. ^{They} They were activists without an urge to reform but passionate in their efforts to improve the

quality of life of their neighbors through education, health-care, and cultural advantages which probably made them the paradigms of pushy women.