

## An Interview with Rosemary Sullivan, after her writing *Stalin's Daughter*

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*Laura Ferri:* In response to the many people who asked you about the process of conceiving and writing *Villa Air Bel* (the awarded book we were proud to present at the Siena-Toronto Centre), you wrote: «To find the book you are destined to write is a slow process. A book moves in on you and occupies you. After having written eleven books, I can almost say a book finds you.» After your 13th book, do you feel the same about the conceiving of the forthcoming *Stalin's Daughter*? Where has it found You? And, in turn, where were its seeds planted?

*Rosemary Sullivan:* I was working with my editor Claire Wachtel in New York on a book proposal called «Love and War,» about 4 couples who went to the Spanish Civil War as couples, but just then a book called *Hotel Florida* (the hotel assigned to the International Brigades) was commissioned by another US publisher. We would be writing about the same material, so I decided not to go forward with the proposal. It was the end of November 2011 and I had read the *New York Times* obituary of Svetlana Alliluyeva who had just died. As Claire and I discussed this, I decided: what could be more compelling, indeed, more tragic than a biography of a woman who had lived a lifetime in the shadow of a brutal dictator? She'd never been permitted to separate herself from her father's name. In 1967, she defected to the West, categorically rejecting her father's crimes, but even here she remained Stalin's daughter. She had spent half of her life in the Soviet Union; half in the US, at the crossroads of the Cold War and of twentieth century history. Her life had to be totally fascinating.

*LF:* How much has Svetlana, *Stalin's Daughter*, «occup[ied] you?»

*RS:* Svetlana obsessed me for 3 and ½ years. I read her books, searched archives, FBI, CIA, and NARA files, interviewed forty people: in Russia, Georgia, England and throughout the US The experience was completely absorbing.

*LF:* Which are the parts of Stalin's daughter's tumultuous life that have intrigued you most?

The interview took place via electronic correspondence on 25 March 2015

RS: That is a difficult question since she lived at least three lives, but I would start with her childhood. Her mother committed suicide when Svetlana was 6 ½; her father had several of her aunts and uncles executed as «enemies of the people»; he sent other relatives to the Gulag. She fell in love with a famous filmmaker, Aleksei Kapler, when she was 16. Her father had him exiled to the Gulag for ten years. Her beloved brother died in a German POW camp in 1943. How do you survive such a history? Finally, when she rejected the Soviet system and defected in 1967, the US State Department gave instructions not to accept her. They were engaged in détente with the USSR and didn't want her muddying the waters. She was briefly parked in Switzerland, which changed the entire course of her life. The dramatic twists in her life, at the hands of the KGB and the CIA, never ended.

LF: In *Villa Air-Bel*, a biography which has «the narrative energy of fiction,» to use your expression in *Confessions of a Biographer*, you delve into a fascinating political saga in our recent history. Which steps have you made to delve next into the individual life of a single woman, who first enjoyed the privilege of loving, protective fatherly affection and then was condemned to live with the stigma that marked her as a cruel dictator's daughter?

RS: I am totally fascinated by the intersection of public power and private lives, and I think this shapes both books. Stalin may have been an affectionate father when Svetlana was a child, though his affection was always conditional and he was an absence more than a presence. When Svetlana became a young woman, he was changeable and often cruel. She was essentially emotionally orphaned. Slowly she learned who her father really was, and faced that horror. That took courage. In writing her life, I had to weave between the public world – the Stalin and post-Stalin era until 1967, and the politics of the West since 1967, while never losing sight of Svetlana's intimate life. But I had her published and unpublished manuscripts and access to several hundred of her letters, and to the intimate memories of her family and friends, which allowed me to recover her personal voice.

LF: How have you moved from more intimate stories like *By Heart* or writers' biographies like *Shadow Maker* to the writing about public people from recent history?

RS: My early books were biographies of Canadian women writers, and therefore books about my own Canadian culture and history. Then I wanted to move to a different canvas – I had lived in France and *Villa Air-Bel* seemed an obvious subject, a kind of collective biography of people caught in the horror of WWII. I have always been fascinated by Russia – like most of my generation I grew up on Russian literature and visited the Soviet Union for the first time in 1979. To write the biography of the daughter of Stalin was thrilling. I wanted to un-

derstand what it was like to be her as a woman living in a terrifying political context.

LF: In *Search of Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood wrote: «We live in a period in which memory of all kinds, including the sort of larger memory we call history, is being called into question. For history as for the individual, forgetting can be just as convenient as remembering, and remembering what was once forgotten can be distinctly uncomfortable.» Have you found that Svetlana's daughter would have preferred to forget about her grandfather's infamous history rather being reminded of it with your interview?

RS: No, Svetlana brought up her daughter to be totally American. She never met nor had any connection with her grandfather. When I first interviewed her as I started this project, she affirmed the idea of a biography of her mother. She had read some of my books and felt I was a serious biographer. I understood Svetlana's daughter wanted the misrepresentations about her mother's life (and there were many) corrected. Her mother was much more than simply Stalin's daughter.

LF: Do you think she has much edited the memory she has offered to you?

RS: As a biographer, you must try to corroborate every story you are offered. I found Svetlana's daughter amazingly direct and candid; but her anecdotes were confirmed by others who had known her mother. I did not find that she edited her memory to fit a version of her mother. She understood her mother's complex fate, but the woman who emerged from her and others' memories is a very compelling figure.

LF: If you agree with Margaret MacMillan in considering «memory a tricky business,» when do you find memory more so? When you deal with memory that «travels in the blood,» as in your *The Guthrie Road*, or when you have to dig for it into public, historical archives?

RS: Each is tricky, though often documents are more reliable than «blood memory.» And of course memory is fluid. In writing *Shadow Maker*, I put the biographer as a persona in the book searching and recognizing that much gets lost in what I called «the pockets of memory.» But you have to understand that anecdotes in a biography tell as much about the speaker as about the subject, and, juxtaposed, they add up to a collective portrait of the subject. Of course there can be no single, final biography of a subject (there are probably 100 about Stalin) since a biography is an interpretation of a life, but if undertaken seriously, it is an effort, however provisional, to illuminate the complex narrative of a life.

LF: How does telling about someone else's lives differ from «unearthing those phantoms you hear calling in your blood»? You may remember the phrase is from «The Trail that Led to Me», an essay from your 2001 selection *Memory-Making* which foreran the recounting of your own roots in 2009 with *The Guthrie Road*.

RS: Ah yes, the difference between autobiography and biography. In writing memoir, you can never have the distance, and the possibility of a certain objectivity, that biography allows. In writing about my family roots, I relied only on family stories, and did not do the archival and documentary search biography necessitates. I suppose my point was that *The Guthrie Road* was about the anecdotes, indeed even myths that a family tells itself.

LF: In *The Guthrie Road* you give us the reason why we search roots and unearth buried ancestors: «However inaccessible they are to those who follow after, they are the life force itself. It is from them that we take our being» (p. 80). In *Confessions of a Biographer* quoting Philip Roth saying «To be alive is to be made of memory,» you reiterated that we are shaped by the past. Can you expand on the idea that memory making is urged by the search for one's own identity?

RS: When you are young you are preoccupied with inventing yourself. You need to find out who you are, your personal identity. As you get older and have separated yourself from your family, you become fascinated by your ancestral roots. This happens to everybody. I called my Selected Poems: *The Bone Ladder* - a metaphor for the human ladder that you descend to arrive at yourself. What are our ancestors but memory, since they are no longer accessible to us in the flesh? Roth is right: we are made of memory.

LF: In your *Confessions of a Biographer* you reveal a concern larger than a personal need. You write: «I think of biography as a rebellion against the impossible fact that life can so easily disappear - all that energy, passion, individuality that constitutes a person can one day simply stop, or be brutally ended. Biography is a form of revenge against effacement.» You have recently suffered your mother's death. Do you feel that your writing her own life might be a way of redeeming her disappearance?

RS: But the most poignant thing is that we rarely ask those we love the questions a biographer might ask. What was my mother's life like as a child on an Ontario farm with ten siblings? How did the fact of never knowing her father, who died when she was two, affect her life? What was she like as a beautiful young woman before she met my father and became my mother? These questions I can never answer. I would only ever be able to write about her as my mother. Could I ever get past that to write her life? I doubt it.

LF: Did your mother read *The Guthrie Road*? What were her reactions?

RS: Yes, and she was pleased with the book, but we did not talk about it. She was too private a person for that. But other relatives have said they are happy I recorded those family stories of stoicism and endurance in pioneer Canada.

*LF:* Do you think your mother would appreciate having her family's story translated into Italian?

*RS:* She would be flabbergasted, and pleased. She visited Ireland and France but never Italy. I think it would delight her to know that her family story would be read in Italy. She was very proud of her mother, a woman who brought up ten children virtually on her own after her husband died at age 45. She was proud to be a Guthrie.

