

Nina Khrushcheva

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C.

George Thuronyi:

This is George Thuronyi at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th, will mark the 14th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will this year hold evening hours for the first time in its new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, in Washington, D.C. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now, it is my pleasure to introduce author and professor at The New School in New York, Nina Khrushcheva, whose latest book is titled, "The Lost Khrushchev: A Family Journey into the Gulag of the Russian Mind." Thank you so much for joining us.

Nina Khrushcheva:

You too.

George Thuronyi:

Nina, you come from a notable family in Russian history. You were the great-granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev, former Soviet premier, whom you considered your adoptive grandfather, and his son, Leonid Khrushchev, both of whom you write about extensively in your book. Can you tell us why you decided to research and tell your family's story?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Because of Vladimir Putin, I was not going to write this book, at least not now. I thought that one day, I would have to write a Khrushchev book, because usually from families like mine, there's an expectation that you kind of have to write a family book. So I thought I would have to, but Vladimir Putin really changed all that, and I was -- I found his leadership a bit of an insult to all the attempts to democratize it, Russia, first the Soviet Union, and then Russia ever had [spelled phonetically]. And his policies, especially that they have seen all over the world today in Ukraine, really made me sort of research the book, because what happened since he came to power in 2000, that suddenly Joseph Stalin became a very important figure, not that he wasn't important in Soviet history, but suddenly he became a hero. He was called a good manager of the Russian state, even if people were killed. But you know, we have -- we had great parades, people would say.

And so, I wanted to rehabilitate, because Putin was rehabilitating Stalin, who was deemed and known as a dictator, I wanted to rehabilitate my family, I wanted to rehabilitate Khrushchev, and particularly, Leonid Khrushchev, who under Putin, suddenly became known, or allegedly became known as Benedict Arnold of the Soviet Union, as if it is possible that he betrayed the Motherland -- that's what he was accused of -- instead of dying in 1943 as a hero in an air battle. Suddenly, it was a very official version that he, in fact, actually defected to the Nazis. And Nikita Khrushchev, who denounced Stalin in 1956, didn't do it because he felt guilty that he was one of the Stalin -- politicians, Stalin

[inaudible] trust, Stalin lieutenant for many of his -- much of his political life, and instead, it was now seen -- it has been seen as just a simple family revenge, because Stalin punished Leonid for being a traitor, stole him from the Nazis, and punished him. Then, Nikita Khrushchev just denounced Stalin, only because he wanted to avenge the death of his son.

George Thuronyi:

And I understand that you had, in fact, a chance meeting with Molotov, who was once Stalin's foreign minister, who called Leonid Khrushchev a traitor, and that that was one of the sparks, also, that led you onto writing the book. And what did you, in the end, discover about Leonid's fate?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Well, with Molotov, it's -- I mean, it's part -- the first time I started thinking about Leonid, because Nikita Khrushchev actually never talked about his son, who was my grandfather, and Nikita Khrushchev's oldest son. I grew up with Khrushchev, big Khrushchev, as my grandfather. And I was sort of wondering why, on Earth, they never talked about him at home. My mother never talked about him, although we knew he existed, and he was a hero, but that's all we knew. And what I really learned, that Leonid was the first dissident -- I call him the first dissident in the Soviet Union, because everybody -- when everybody was a devoted communist in the cities, Leonid was already rebelling against this very inhuman, grandiose system of everybody surrendering to the state's will.

And he was a great believer in individuality. He was very inventive this way, but never wanted anything to be -- anything to have to do with the state. And that was a major problem with him, between him and his father, and that's why his father was always very embarrassed of him. So, I call Leonid as a, you know, I call him a James Dean of Soviet Nomenklatura, because he really was that rebellious; found very interesting, many very interesting details. For example, he and Joseph Stalin's son, his youngest son Vasily, they dated, courted the same woman. And she was in love with Leonid, but when Leonid died in 1943 in an air battle, as I mentioned, she married -- this woman married Vasily, and was his -- one of his many, many wives.

So, there's a lot of things that, if I didn't start writing the book, I wouldn't have found out. Also, I felt that, in the book, I gave tribute to all the women in our family, you know, sort of the whole Mother Russia part of the story, because men are always standing in politics, standing in the Kremlin, but we always forget that there are these great women behind them, and they never get, or never had a voice before. Even today, you know, just look at Russian politics today, there's never too many women speaking out. So I feel that there's a full generation of women that I was able to give voice to, and tell their side of the story, or their version of that very male political system that really Russia experienced, not only that I was talking about the last century, but the last 100 years, but you know, throughout history of Russia altogether. So, I do like my grandfather, my birth grandfather, Leonid, very much, and admire him for being so brave to rebel against the Soviet system as early as 1930s.

George Thuronyi:

You've noted that, as Russia continues to redefine itself, the way in which the Khrushchevs' legacy is viewed also changes over time. What do you see ahead for your family's legacy?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Well, Russia tends to have this interesting pendulum swing. It goes from democracy to dictatorship, not that democracy's ever full blown, but there are some democratic directions. Like Khrushchev, you know, he was not a democrat by any means. I don't call him a democrat. But he really tried to reform the Stalin monolith, communist monolith; so then Mikhail Gorbachev. So -- and we do go through these pendulum swings. You know, you have Stalin, and then you have more democracy Khrushchev, then you have Leonid Brezhnev, then Mikhail Gorbachev, who is infinitely more democratic, and so on. And so, I'm sure that, you know, whoever comes after Putin, if Putin ever goes away, whoever comes after Putin certainly has the potential to be a democrat, or has democratic aspirations. And in this sense, then, Stalin would go down and Khrushchev would go up, because that's how they kind of alternate in politics at all times.

So it would be a cycle, a positive cycle, probably for Khrushchev's legacy. But unless Russia changes and really chooses its Western road that it really has been debating for 250 years, and it is Russia's road, because it is part of Europe, despite our denial that we are, then Khrushchev's legacy is going to be very shaky, because you know, reformers like him, reformers like Mikhail Gorbachev ultimately always surrender to the public's gulag of the mind, that's what the subtitle of my book. The gulag of the mind is that when the Russian people feel that the central control, the large size is more for the state [spelled phonetically], the Kremlin is more important than individual choice and individual choice of liberty and democracy that kind of the West stands up to.

George Thuronyi:

You did a lot of digging around, and found out a lot about your family's history. Did you learn something about yourself in the process?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Yes, yes. I think my major discovery, that I'm more American than I thought I was; that is, for example, I don't take no for an answer. And when I was looking for Leonid's -- the evidence of Leonid not being a traitor, I mean I knew that he wasn't, but I wanted to have an absolute proof, because I was trying to understand why, on earth, Nikita Khrushchev never mentioned him, never talked about him. So, I went into the depths of Russia, you know, 400 miles, 400 kilometers outside of Moscow where Leonid died, where his plane was shot down. And it really was a fascinating journey. And I don't think -- if I were Russian, I probably would not have done that, because it seemed too much out of the way.

I had to, you know, kind of make various efforts that, as a centrist Russian, because Russians do tend to be very Kremlin-centric, as I mentioned, so the provinces and the capital life, the Moscow life, are

very different from each other. So very few Russians actually do venture outside and go to the regions and deal with the regions. So I felt I was sort of my American-ness that forced me to go there. And I talked to peasants, Russian farmers, peasants who used to be collective farmers, and found even a peasant who allegedly saw Leonid being shot down. And so, I think I really felt like, in this book, I had -- in my American way, I had tried to have every stone turned and discovered. And I discovered a lot of things about my birth grandmother, [unintelligible], who was -- who seemed like a great, you know, communist, and a remarkable woman, and yet was sneaky and deceptive, and aggrandized all her achievements just like the Soviet Union was. So there's a lot of connections between personal and political. And what I discovered, that I cannot write, or I cannot be -- I cannot have my personal life without understanding politics better with it.

George Thuronyi:

And, speaking of your family, of course your book was published in the U.S. in English. Has your family in Russia had access to be able to read the book, and how have they reacted?

Nina Khrushcheva:

That's a very good question. I wrote it in English; I started writing it in Russian, and then I realized that I need a bit of a distance between the story and myself -- and me being able to write, because it was so big, the story is very big. It's about big Khrushchev, but also about small Khrushchev. It's about Russia, it's about women, it's about everything; and so, I started writing it in English so I can have a slightly better stream of thoughts, sort of more linear thinking than being bogged down in little details of our Russian lives, or grandiose thinking about Russian lives.

I read pieces of it to my mother. I didn't know what -- I mean, I gave her the whole book. I don't think she's going to read it herself, just because her English is not very good. And I'd like to keep it this way for a while, because I think my family, in some ways, they're very happy that I wrote it, because it was important to write. On the other hand, because of very tumultuous Russian history, they feel that every negative word that I say about the family -- not even negative, but you know, kind of analytical word that I say about the family, somehow becomes a problem and tarnishes Khrushchev's legacy, because they do appear to think that we are just, by definition, perfect. And by the way, that actually made Leonid such a vulnerable figure, because they never talked about his imperfections, and so, his personal imperfections became political ones today. So, I think my family is happy that I wrote it. I don't think they would be as happy when they read the full book, all 250 or somewhat pages of it.

George Thuronyi:

Okay. I apologize for this next question, but I just can't resist asking. Since you did briefly explore this in your book about the now-infamous shoe incident at the U.N., can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Sure, yes. Well, I put it in the footnote, because I knew it would take away some attention. Well, there's a lot of, once again, as I said, no stone unturned. So I interviewed people, I talked to various members of my family as well. They argue, and a lot of people argue that the shoe incident never happened. That is, Khrushchev never banged the shoe, although the shoe was on the table, and he may have even waved it a bit. And it actually, this information does come both from the Russian side and from the American side. My uncle gives the story that Khrushchev's shoe was too -- they were his new shoes, they were too tight, and he dropped one, and then it was given to him by the attendant after he was already seated at his desk, at the Russia desk at the United Nations. And he used this as an opportunity -- I actually think, because I call Khrushchev, Nikita Khrushchev, the first public politician of Russia -- because we didn't really have public politicians, we had leaders -- and he was a public politician in that he was very savvy in terms of how to read his -- to kind of -- to deal with his audience according to the mood or necessity. And so, he really needed to make all of his points. They were very un-imperialistic and un-American to a degree. And so, he felt that the shoe would be, using the shoe would be a bit of a -- would be a bit of a prop. Of course, my aunt, on the other hand, says that he just dropped the, you know, the watch and he saw the shoe and he used it as an opportunity. So even within the family, there are issues.

But I'm sure the shoe was on the table. He may have even touched it, never banged it, because for America, it was also important to use the shoe prop for its own propaganda. And actually, he was an example of how bad the Soviet Union was. I used examples from the Wall Street Journal right after that session of the United Nations. It says that he -- I forgot. I think that he touched the shoe or something. And then, two weeks later, the Wall Street Journal, that he banged the shoe from the podium, and of course, he never was at the podium. He was speaking from his desk.

So there's a very interesting story that, it was such an important symbol of the Cold War. My favorite part -- and that's why even if it didn't happen, it had to be invented. But my favorite part, actually, is real, is that when, later on, when Nikita Khrushchev was telling that story, he did say that the shoe was on the table. He never said he was banging. He said, well, and you know, those Americans, they all got scrambled, but they put their own feet on the table, and suddenly, they were incensed with me. And the fun part is that the Austrian delegation, the next day, sent him a pair of -- and nobody knows that, I actually find it out just for the book -- sent him a pair of ski boots, red and white ski boots, saying, if he wants to make the point next time around, that would be the shoe to use.

[laughter]

George Thuronyi:

Well, that's a very good story. Thank you for clearing that up. Many of our listeners and visitors to the Book Festival have families with interesting histories of one sort or another. Do you have any advice on how to get started researching family stories?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Well, one suggestion is to decide that you really want to do it, because if you don't want to do it, it's a really, very torturous thing. What I found out, that writing a memoir, it seems like it's the easiest thing, because you know, you tell the story that you know, but actually it's the hardest, because you know so much, and it's so close to you that you either need to use a foreign language or something to actually get through all of those emotions and all this information to make a reasonably coherent story. So, I think there are two things that are really important: decide that you want to do it, because your family will be upset with you no matter what you say and how you say it, if the family is still alive; and also, keep the distance, try to find a way to keep the distance between the family story and your own narrative.

George Thuronyi:

Okay, thank you very much. And, in keeping with the theme of this year's National Book Festival, which is, "Stay Up with a Good Book," what book have you been staying up reading lately?

Nina Khrushcheva:

Well, I have a lot of books that I'm staying up with. My favorite writer in the world is Vladimir Nabokov. My previous book was about him, called "Imaging Nabokov: Russia between Art and Politics." So, I keep up with Nabokov, especially with Russia today, I think "Bend Sinister," Nabokov's novel that is not very well-known, but really a fantastic novel, an amazing novel, gives a lot of insight into Vladimir Putin's character. So I've been rereading that. And a little boost to a Washington colleague, Peter Baker, who wrote a fantastic book about Dick Cheney, "The Days of Thunder." I just love that book. My next book, I hope, would be about Dick Cheney. So, he is -- Peter Baker is my role model in writing that.

George Thuronyi:

Thank you very much. We've been hearing from author Nina Khrushcheva, who will appear on Saturday, August 30th, in the History and Biography Pavilion at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center. Thank you, Nina.

Nina Khrushcheva:

Thank you.

Female Speaker:

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