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# The Quiet Revolutionary



The autobiography of  
**Margaret Dewar**

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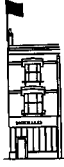
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**The Quiet Revolutionary**





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The Autobiography of Margaret Dewar

## **The Quiet Revolutionary**

by Margaret Dewar

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### **Dedication**

To the memory of those who taught me to see the  
world as it is and as it should be.

Above all to the memory of Hugo, to whom I owe  
so much and who first urged me to write down  
these pages.

My special thanks are due to Margaret Renn and  
Peter Marsden for their encouragement  
and patient help.



ERRATA:

Brandler's KPD co-founder was August Thalheimer, not Thalmann (page 147, line 9); last democratic Reichstag elections were in 1933, not 1934 (page 157, line 1).

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Part One:  
**Life in Russia**



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## CHAPTER 1

# Earliest Memories

THE YEAR was 1904. We were travelling in a *kibitka* through the snow. Sitting snugly on straw in the depth of the sleigh, wrapped up to the tips of our noses in rugs, our nanny, my sister Helga and I were following the *kibitka* carrying my parents, on our way from the port of Arkhangelsk to Ust-Tsylma, some 300 miles further north-east, less than a hundred miles from the Arctic Circle. Suddenly our *kibitka* turned over and we all tumbled into the deep snow. No harm was done, except for the shock to our parents. My sister was just over a year old, I was three. These are my very first memories.

Why were we travelling so far north? My father had been manager of a pencil factory in Riga, the capital of Latvia, which was at that time part of Russia. In a desire to branch out on his own, he had decided, in partnership with a Polish civil engineer, to explore the slate deposits near Ust-Tsylma. The slate proved to be of inferior quality, the venture came to nothing and we returned to Riga about a year and a half later.

In spite of some difficulties, life there was not unpleasant according to my mother. Ust-Tsylma was the district town of the region, a glorified village where the rivers Tsylma and Pechora meet. It consisted of one-storey log-houses for the local people and larger two-storey houses for the doctor, the judge, the teacher, the paymaster, and for us. This was the sum total of the élite—all Russians, except my family who were a mixture. The rest of the population were the *Samoyedy*, a slightly Mongolian type of people—now called by their ethnic name *Nentsy*, the inhabitants of the Nenetski and two neighbouring districts. They were breeders of reindeer, fishermen, and some worked at the nearby sawmill (which provided Helga and me with sawdust, in place of sand, to play with).

As I look at the map I see that even now there is no railway line running through those parts, though oil has been discovered on the Yamal Peninsula. Reindeer were the only means of trans-

port in winter, as horses were unable to stand the temperatures down to minus 40 degrees Centigrade. Large stretches of the tundra were permanently frozen to a considerable depth. In the short but quite warm summer the surface of the tundra turned into marshes and bogs. Vegetation was poor, but there were coniferous virgin forests and I remember a picnic in the summer on the edge of a forest by a small stream and my father standing on the top of a hill on the other side. I insisted on following him, promptly slipped on the flat stones and had to be rescued, wet and howling.

The people of the region were friendly, and were hardy workers, if rather primitive and mostly illiterate. A young woman who helped my mother in the house, a young wife of six months' standing, sobbed bitterly, complaining that her husband did not love her. Proof of this was, as she explained to my mother, that he had never yet beaten her, a custom which he had apparently shed after working for a time in a larger town. The log houses were primitive, as were most peasant houses in Russia before the Revolution. Ust-Tsylma had one common bath house, a sort of sauna where the locals all used to go together; there they sweated on hot bricks, slashing each other with birch branches to massage themselves, pouring hot water over themselves from wooden buckets. Then, stark naked, they hopped out into the cold air, rolled themselves in the freezing snow, and then repeated the process of steaming and cooling off. I imagine we and the rest of the 'élite' had some sort of wash tubs in our houses, which had to be filled and emptied by hand.

In winter everybody—men, women and children—wore *malitzas*, a kind of reindeer-skin coat, hand-sewn together in one piece, which had to be pulled on and off over the head. On our feet we wore high, soft, fur boots, called *pimy*, beautifully made from long strips of reindeer fur, dyed in different colours. For winter entertainment the five families got together for parties and dances, and sometimes a fancy-dress ball. I remember a photograph of my parents dressed in native wedding attire: the bridegroom in a long reindeer-skin tunic, the bride in a similar coat-dress, made of some thick, luxurious, golden material, which my mother had borrowed from somebody.

Sometimes some of the men would organise excursions to surrounding areas. My father, who was very keen on collecting and pressing plants, was astonished to find Forget-me-nots beyond the Arctic circle.

On the whole life was quite bearable. In the short summer,

when the rivers and the Barents Sea were free of ice, huge barges would arrive, selling household goods, fabrics, clothing, tools, and all sorts of luxury food. The paymaster had taken a fancy to us children, especially me, as I could already walk around and talk. He used to take me to the barges and treat me to delicious sweets, lovely toys and dolls, as well as the traditional carved and painted Russian bowls and spoons.

When we returned to Riga, We went by ship to Arkhangelsk. One morning my mother called me to the port-hole of the cabin and I saw with astonishment huge ice blocks, almost mountains, floating in the water, lit up in pink and pale yellow in the early morning sun.

This was 1905. At about the time of our return the Revolution broke out. The defeat of the Russian navy in the war against Japan and growing unrest among workers and peasants throughout the summer, had led in October to the setting up of the workers' councils (*soviets*) in St Petersburg, under Leon Trotsky's leadership. Later, my mother told us about shooting, dead bodies in the streets of Riga, and her anxiety every time my father had to leave the house. I don't think she knew what it was all about, and at the time, of course, I knew nothing. All I remember of that winter was that an ice rink was made for me in the back garden of our house and on my fifth birthday I was given my first pair of skates.

I was born early in 1901 and named Margarete. But Rita was the name I became known by, from the Russian Margarita. My sister Helga was born next, in 1902. Our brother Hardy was born in 1906. During the First World War we Russified her name to Olga, or Olya, and called Hardy by his second name, Andreas—or Andryusha for short. When Hardy was born we were kept in the garden all day while my mother was in labour. She was disappointed as she would have liked only daughters. But she loved him dearly all the same, especially as he was a frail child during the first years of his life. The doctors diagnosed haemophilia and he was frequently 'at death's door'. His condition improved in later years and disappeared altogether when he grew up. Perhaps it was a false diagnosis.

My mother Ella had rather delicate health, probably because she worried about my brother. She had married at eighteen or nineteen; my father, Leonard Watz, was twelve years older. But my mother must have been pretty tough, having to withstand all our moves and see us through most of the children's diseases that were rampant in those days: measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough, diphtheria and the like. Our family doctor was a familiar



figure in our house.

During that time in Riga I became more aware of our extended family. My mother's father had died early, leaving his widow to bring up five daughters and two sons on his civil service pension. I have a photograph in which our stately and handsome grandmother sits with an air of quiet and slightly amused authority, surrounded by all her children, a daughter-in-law and a son in-law.

After 1940, when the Baltic states were occupied by the Russians, and later incorporated into the USSR as federal republics, these aunts emigrated to Germany together with their husbands and children. Only one cousin, a forester, and our uncle Arthur stayed on.

We saw far less of the relatives on my father's side, yet I remember more of their way of life—perhaps because it was so very different. They had a farm at a place called Rujen, with fields, horses, cows and other animals. The one-storey timber house was spacious, and I particularly remember a large, light room with colourful home-made rugs on the white-washed wooden floor, and my grandmother's bedroom with numerous pillows of varying sizes piled up in pyramid-fashion, and a large, high chest of drawers. There was also a separate building, a kitchen with two large, built-in cauldrons where something was always simmering and being stirred.

There was another room where the family sat together in the evening. It was darkly lit with candles or paraffin lamps, and my baby sister lay in an old cradle which hung from the ceiling. Once, when I was rocking the cradle, the spring near the ceiling suddenly snapped and hit my sister on the forehead very near her eyes. The scar remained for many years. I was petrified and, though it was obviously not my fault, went round the room saying, 'I am sorry', to every single person. I seem to have been obsessed by feelings of guilt when very small.

They too were a large family. My father had ten or eleven brothers and sisters, but the only ones we knew well were my father's youngest sister Victoria—Aunt Tori—who subsequently lived with us for several years, and Uncle Oskar, who stayed with us in Riga during his vacations while a medical student. He later became a very successful gynaecologist with a house in Riga and a summer house at the seaside. He too emigrated in 1940 with his wife, daughter and son-in-law, to Eastern Germany—where he worked at a hospital, had his private practice and was called upon for his opinion as a forensic consultant. He died at a very

ripe old age.

My father's family were Latvian. Our grandmother spoke hardly any Russian or German. The daughters knew more Russian than German, and all except Aunt Tori married locally and stayed on the land. As children we were not really conscious of our partly Latvian ancestry, or at any rate it did not mean anything to us. Latvian was never spoken at home, except when our mother and Aunt Tori wanted to talk about something that we were not supposed to know (when, with a kind of sixth sense, I always vaguely guessed what it was about). It was the language of the lower classes, the workers and peasants, the artisans and servants. When Latvian parents were in a position to afford a secondary education and perhaps university for their sons (hardly ever for daughters), many of them no longer considered themselves Latvians, but merged with the native German middle class, all of whom spoke Russian owing (or thanks) to the Russification policy of the Tsarist government.

Latvia was one of the Baltic states. Together with Estonia, it came under Russian rule in the 18th century; Lithuania followed after one of the partitions of Poland. They were all to become independent Republics for the first time after the 1917 Revolution. At the beginning of the century the population of Latvia was 65 per cent Latvians and about 15 per cent each Germans and Russians. The Germans, possibly because of their generally better education and standard of living, played a significant role in the running of the country. Even before 1917 there must have been a national liberation movement among the younger generation of middle-class Latvians, and some Latvians joined the Red Army and the state political administration which later became the KGB, the secret police.

Aunt Tori became our main contact with our Latvian background. She came to live with us for a number of years after we had moved to St Petersburg in 1907. She must have been around twenty then, cheerful and a good companion for us children. She used to sing Latvian folk-songs and tell us about country customs. In those years we went to the farm for holidays, and were once allowed to watch the mid-summer's night festival, when young girls and boys dressed in their attractive national costumes, the girls with embroidered white blouses, swinging skirts, wreaths of flowers and long multi-coloured ribbons on their heads; the boys in embroidered shirts. They danced their national dances and sang. At midnight fires were lit and the boys and girls jumped through the flames.

In later years, even after we had moved to St Petersburg, we went to the seaside instead. The Baltic coast is ideal for summer holidays with its fine, white sand, long, almost melancholy, dunes, and, behind them, high and slender pine trees. The scent of the pines combined with the smell of the sea was wonderful. Sometimes a whiff of smoke would drift across from the huts and the shacks where freshly caught fish was smoked or cured. There was no tide, but to a small child the waves in windy weather seemed enormously high. The bathing costumes of the women would bulge out in the wind like red or blue balloons with white patterns. They looked rather funny, their sleeves with frills and ribbons right down to the elbow, the legs reaching down to the knees. With the bathing suits went a bonnet adorned with lace and ribbons. That must have been for mixed bathing, because a little further along the beach there was also nude bathing, at different times for women and for men. I don't remember what kind of bathing suits we children wore. I only remember our play-suits, which my mother had made for us herself: bright red with white; bulging knickers with braces and elastic around the waist, to be worn with or without a blouse. I found them ridiculous and hated wearing them, but had to all the same.

There was a footpath of long planks of wood, separating the houses and villas from the beach, but no real promenade. There were larger, more fashionable seaside resorts, with a proper promenade, cafés and other places of amusement, but our parents seemed content with the more modest one. And the sea and sand did my little brother no end of good. One year, somebody suggested 'sand baths' for him because of his poor health, so we buried him in the sand regularly, right up to his neck. When we returned to town our family doctor could hardly believe he was the same child, so good and almost unexpected was his recovery.

In St Petersburg we lived in a flat in a large house on the corner of two wide streets. Our walks were now mainly in the Botanical Gardens nearby. My most vivid memory is of one of the hot-houses, which contained a pond and on it a most unusual plant, a *Victoria Regis*, completely flat with an upturned rim, which looked like a gigantic green frying pan. We were told by one of the attendants that the plant was strong enough to hold my five-year-old sister. Sometimes in winter we were taken for walks through the streets, our little brother sitting in a pram (there were no push-chairs in those days) or carried by my mother or Aunt Tori. He would be wrapped up in a long white coat with a cape reaching over his shoulders and arms, a blue gauze veil

protecting his face from the cold wind and his eyes from the glare of the sun.

St Petersburg was built at the beginning of the 18th century by Peter the Great. He had travelled abroad, had studied West European industrial and technical methods and had himself worked for a time as a ship's carpenter in Holland. He was determined to introduce these methods in backward Russia which still lived in the Dark Ages, with harsh and rigorous measures against those who dared to oppose the will of the Tsars. He made the Boyars, the ruling clique, shave off their long beards and exchange their tunic-like kaftans for European clothes, much to their disgust and opposition. But he persisted. And he could also swing an axe and a hammer. He first built the port and fortress of Kronstadt in the gulf of Finland as a protection for the future town of St Petersburg, and as a base for the Baltic Fleet which was to play such a victorious role in the revolution of 1917, and such a disputed role in the uprising of 1921 against the policy of the Bolsheviks. Peter the great built himself a tiny house right by the river Neva, rolled up his sleeves and got down to building this fleet, directing and supervising, earning himself the title 'the carpenter-Tsar'. That tiny house, full of tools and drawings plus a bed, is probably still there, unless it has been transferred somewhere else since my childhood days.

He then started on the construction of St Petersburg, on land reclaimed in the estuary of the Neva. He engaged French and Italian architects, who planned a spacious city of classical beauty, with numerous outstanding buildings. Later the resplendent Isaac Cathedral was built, with its huge cupola covered with gold leaf, and many splendid palaces for the aristocracy alongside the canals. On one of the squares a bronze memorial was erected on a granite block: Peter the Great sitting on a rearing horse with one arm outstretched over the city he had built. In time, St Petersburg became the capital city, an international cultural and social centre, and also the chief industrial centre of Russia with its large armament plants, the workers of which played such a decisive role in 1905 and 1917.

On 9 January 1905 some 200,000 workers, led by the priest Gapon, a police stooge, gathered on the vast parade ground in front of the Winter Palace to petition Tsar Nicholas II for better working conditions, an easing of the autocratic regime and a constitutional government. In reply thousands of workers on the parade ground, as well as in other parts of the city, were mowed down by artillery fire, thus unleashing the first Russian Revol-

ution—the dress rehearsal for 1917.

I remember some of the more prominent buildings and streets in St Petersburg, but my most vivid memory is of the Peter and Paul Fortress, with its sharp golden needle glistening in the sun and stretching high into the sky. Many revolutionaries, men and women, languished there for years, some till they died, others till they were banished to Siberia. Many made the long trek into exile on foot with chains around their ankles. Their plight had been described in the Russian literature of the 19th century, as had the compassion shown to them in the countryside.

The fortress is situated on the banks of the Neva by a bridge which we had to cross over whenever we went to the centre of the town. I knew what it was, but, of course, at the age of seven or eight I knew next to nothing of history or politics. For me, as for many others, it just happened to be near where the great event of the year took place: the breaking of the ice on the Neva in spring. It was an impressive spectacle. A few days before the ice got going there was a roar and a rumbling, and sounds as if from an explosion. Then the people knew: '*Lyod poshol!*'—'The ice is on the move'. The first real cracks were then announced by cannon shots from the Peter and Paul Fortress, and everybody who could would rush to the embankments or on to the bridge. It was a tremendous sight: the masses of ice split, small and large cracks appeared, lumps of ice of all sizes and shapes would pile one upon the other, crushing into each other with crunching and grinding sounds, and all this mass moving in a steady, rapid stream towards the estuary and the sea. I was allowed to watch this spectacle from the bridge with Aunt Tori. Then summer came with its white nights. What a bore it was to have to go to bed in daylight!

I regret never having revisited what is now Leningrad—St Petersburg became Petrograd during the First World War, and Leningrad after the October Revolution; it also ceased to be the capital, which moved to Moscow. I had an opportunity to go back in 1931, but I didn't have the time—of this more in due course.

But I did visit Moscow again, in 1961, working as an interpreter at the British Industrial Trade Fair which was held in the huge Sokolniki Park on the outskirts. The delegates and interpreters were able to book theatre and concert tickets through Intourist, the state travel agency, and most of the businessmen and their secretaries went to the ballet at the Bolshoi Theatre. I went to the opera, for old times' sake, and to a play at the Maly Theatre (the equivalent of London's National Theatre).

But what I wanted to see was a new play, **The Emperor's**

**New Clothes**, at the small Sokolniki Theatre. All the tickets were sold out, Intourist assured me. This may have been true, but I knew the play was about Stalin and his disastrous personality cult, which had been denounced by Khrushchev in 1956. A period of relaxation had followed, reflected in changes in the economy, in politics and in the arts—the ice was on the move. So I went to the theatre's director, explained that I and a colleague were anxious to see the play, and he kindly gave us tickets. It was an amazing play, full of allusions to Stalin while keeping strictly to the original story. There was an unmistakable stirring in the theatre and two youngish men sitting in front of us kept turning to each other with amazed and delighted expressions on their faces. The 'ice' was indeed on the move!

I started school at the age of seven, which is still customary in Russia, but in those days school was not compulsory. Consequently, the illiteracy rate among the workers and, particularly, the peasants of pre-revolutionary Russia was extremely high. I was sent to the German school, and though I must have attended the preparatory forms for two years, I remember nothing at all of those school days. All I recollect are the tram rides to school with my father, who usually sat reading the paper. I tried to imitate him—with some difficulty, since the paper was too large for a small child to handle. But I could read—my mother taught me when I was five—and I was trying to puzzle out what could be interesting in a newspaper. I asked my father whether everything printed in it was true. With slight amusement, perhaps mixed with cynicism, my father replied: 'Some of it is.'

I wish I could recollect something of my first school years, but there is a complete blank. However, I clearly remember homework sessions under the strict supervision of my mother, who aimed at near perfection for her first-born, and many times I had to copy and recopy the work. Apart from that my mother spent a great deal of time playing with us and teaching us to do things. Among the games I disliked intensely was a singing and miming game, 'the washerwomen', where we had to imitate their movements during the whole process of washing.

There were no washing machines or laundrettes in those days. Whoever could afford it, and did not have sufficient permanent maids to live in, hired a woman for the whole day to rub the washing—everything from handkerchiefs to sheets—over a washing board in the kitchen sink, after boiling the whites in a big container on the wood-burning kitchen stove. The sheets were pulled straight by two people, folded and put through the mangle.

Ironing was done with big clumsy irons filled with glowing charcoal, which had to be renewed as soon as the coal had burnt out. A laborious process, the whole business.

To our great delight on these days, and occasionally on Saturdays when there was a lot of baking going on, we often just had boiled potatoes with marinated herring and onions for lunch or, better still, slices of very fresh black bread, thickly spread with butter and tomatoes—much better than the usual two or even three-course midday meal.

I was not very fond of dolls. I much preferred to play with small tin soldiers, of which I had quite a collection. (Yet military music in the streets always made me cry.) But one day sticks in my memory: rebuked by my mother for not playing often enough with Helga, I got conscience-stricken and spent a whole day with her, trundling our dolls' prams up and down the corridor, in and out of the rooms, dressing and undressing them. That night I felt very virtuous when I went to bed.

Much more fun than dolls and miming games were the various handicraft skills our mother taught us. Fretwork was fascinating, and painting on cloth, and burning various designs with specially heated needles on wooden objects—boxes, trays, napkin rings and so on. We loved modelling with plasticine, and I was particularly fond of making tiny objects from aluminium foil. Our parents themselves took pleasure in making things for us, especially at Christmas: dolls' houses, furniture, dolls' dresses and similar things.

What a delight Christmas was in my childhood. There was nothing commercialised about the festival. Simply mystery and anticipation were in the air: the carrying and hiding of parcels by our parents; their inexplicable activities, which stopped in a pointedly casual way the moment we entered the room. Of course, we always knew that all this concerned Christmas and we desperately tried to discover what exactly was planned. The last few days before Christmas Eve the flat was full of cooking and baking smells: the traditional *Pfefferkuchen*—brown, spiced treacle biscuits, sand-biscuits that melted in your mouth, cakes and tarts. On Christmas Eve itself there was always clear soup with small savouries, shaped like half moons, filled with chopped bacon and onions; home-made brawn and other Baltic delicacies. For Christmas dinner the Russian tradition was to have a stuffed, roasted, suckling pig. There was a big market in the centre of Moscow, where row upon row of stiff, pink piglets were laid out for the inspection of prospective customers.

The living room with the tall Christmas tree reaching from the floor to ceiling was out of bounds for us during the day on Christmas Eve. So was practically the entire flat, since we were considered to be in the way almost everywhere. The midday meal was scrappy and hurried. We could hardly contain our impatience and curiosity whilst our parents were decorating the tree in the afternoon with dozens of colourful candles and glittering and sparkling decorations.

Sometimes we were taken to the Protestant church for the Christmas service in the early evening. This was both a solemn and joyful experience: the two huge lit-up trees, the hearty singing of the congregation, the generally festive mood.

Then, at home again, we sat in semi-darkness in a last, expectant hush. The little bell finally tinkled, the double doors were flung open, and the candlelight blinded us for a moment as we faced the gloriously bright and sparkling tree. But we had to pay for the surprise, the delight and the presents. For weeks beforehand we had to practise Christmas carols and learn to recite special Christmas verses with good wishes and promises to be good in the New Year. I had to copy out these poems on large Christmas cards under the supervision of my mother (for whom it was thus no surprise). Only then were we let loose to rush to inspect all the wonderful things we had been given. We were rarely disappointed. One thing, though, marred my joy: I was never very demonstrative, and my mother often interpreted this as ingratitude.

On the following two or three days there was a round of visits from or to relatives and friends. But the most enjoyable moments for me were waking up in the morning, not to be rushed out of bed, to take in all the Christmas smells—the tree, the candles, the cooking and baking—that pervaded the house and to read one of my new books. I particularly remember one Christmas morning when, having for some reason or other slept in the living room right under the Christmas tree, I avidly began to read Goethe's **Faust** in a version with useful annotations. I don't know how much I understood of it at the age of twelve or thirteen, but I found it fascinating.

Next were the New Year's Eve amusements with the traditional pastime of 'looking into the future'. Together with the grown-ups we stuck labels with different inscriptions on the inside of a large bowl of water and used the halves of empty walnut shells as boats, into which we stuck small lighted candles. They floated on the water, which we agitated, and we waited until the



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